The New Criterion

December 2004

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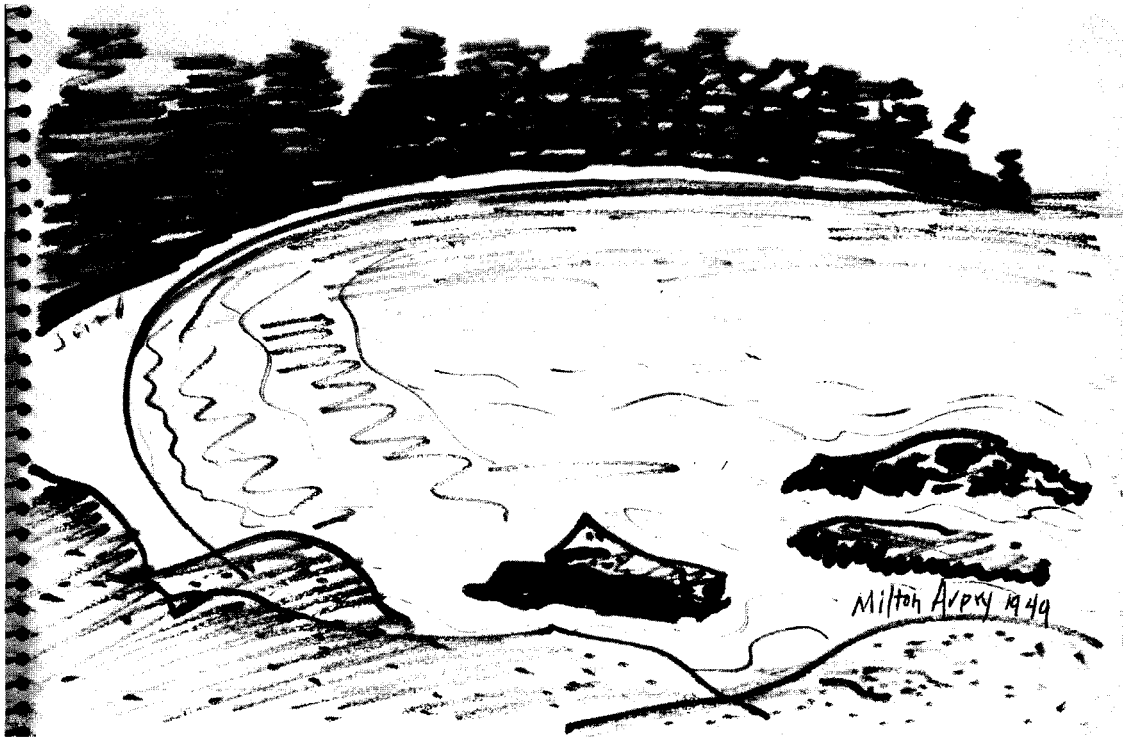

Milton Avery (1885–1965) Sketchbook: Pemaquid Pt., Maine, 1949, 31 drawings, 6 x 9 1/4 inches

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JEFF REESE

THE PROGRESS OF PHILOSOFIA . PART IX JEFF REESE 2002

The spirit, viewed from within, is omnipresent and timeless, and must be spoken of as falling, or coming down, or entering (as Aristotle puts it) through the house-door. Spirit calls itself a stranger, because it finds the world strange; and it finds the world strange because, being the spirit of a very high-strung and perilously organized animal, it is sensitive to many influences not harmonious with its own impulses, and has to beg its daily bread. Yet it is rich in resource; and it gives itself out for a traveller and tells marvellous lies about its supposed native land, where it was a prince and an omnipotent poet. These boasts serve the spirit as a declaration of independence, and a claim to immense superiority above the world. This independence, however, is really only the independence of ignorance, that must think and act at random; and the spirit would add sanity to its spirituality if it recognized the natural, precarious, and exquisite life of which it is the spirit.

George Santayana, Soliloquies in England and Later Soliloquies, 1922. Charles Scribner's Sons

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The New Criterion *December 2004*

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Notes & Comments: December 2004

The New Criterion *on art*

In this issue, as has been our practice for the past three Decembers, we offer our readers a Special Section on art. This is over and above our usual coverage of the visual arts, which, though a regular feature, may still be described as "special" in its breadth and quality. Readers will find illuminating reviews of Aristide Maillol's sculpture (by Karen Wilkin), the painting of Romare Bearden (Eric Gibson), the *objets* of the Aztecs (by Peter Pettus), and the near-collaborations of Joan Miró and Alexander Calder (by James Panero). In addition, there is a conversation about art between the figurative painter Philip Pearlstein and the poet David Yezzi, an essay about taste by the conservator Marco Grassi, a brief review of a new book about Winslow Homer's *Gulf Stream* (by Roger Kimball), and excerpts from the memoirs of the art dealer André Emmerich about the critic Clement Greenberg and the painter Helen Frankenthaler. James Panero writes about his experience lecturing at Benton, a fictional college made famous by Randall Jarrell but which, in Mr. Panero's hands, bears a marked resemblance to an institution in Providence, Rhode Island, that Mr. Panero happened to attend as a graduate student.

The biggest event of the season for the art world is the long-awaited reopening of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Gutted, enlarged, and transformed by the Japanese architect Yoshio Taniguchi at a cost of $425 million, MOMA—which had been closed since 2002—is a much bigger, much brighter, and altogether more imposing institution than anything Alfred H. Barr could have imagined when he founded the museum in 1929. The art historian Michael J. Lewis offers a thoughtful look at the architectural aspects of the new MOMA later in this issue. Here we would like to offer a few thoughts about what MOMA in its current incarnation says about the aesthetic and curatorial vision of the museum as it enters the twenty-first century.

It is one of the ironies of art history that although Alfred Barr was a prodigious (and astute) collector of the contemporary art of his time, the museum that he created was never a museum of contemporary art (a locution that teeters on self-contradiction) but a museum devoted to the representative art of a particular historical period, the period of high modernism: roughly from 1880–1950. This is a fact that has never sat easily with the trustees of MOMA, and it is a fact that, since the death of Barr in 1967, has been regarded with increasing neglect or disdain by MOMA's curators. More and more, MOMA has wanted to be all things to all interests in the art world, which meant that more and more it had to bracket its role as a museum of modern art in order to be-

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come a museum of contemporary art. The huge expansion of the museum by Cesar Pelli in 1984 was, in part, an effort to accommodate the museum to this new role. The current expansion has sealed that ambition, so to speak, in stone.

What we have been given by Mr. Taniguchi and the museum's curators is a kind of replica of the Museum of Modern Art. The itinerary—or, to use a word much favored by MOMA's current administration, the "narrative"—envisioned by Barr has been relegated to the status of a sample storyline in a large, unwieldy, and inconclusive plot—a plot, moreover, whose connection with distinctively *aesthetic* values is often tenuous at best. In our view, Mr. Taniguchi's design—a mixture of gigantism and chilliness masquerading as elegance—reinforces this tenuousness. Many observers have already told us that Mr. Taniguchi's building does not "compete" with the art it houses. This is true enough: it doesn't compete because it doesn't relate to the art at all. In this sense, Mr. Taniguchi has admirably fulfilled the desire of his clients to provide a building that puts the original spirit of MOMA in its place by impressing the viewer as a kind of contemporary, white-walled Piranesian no-place.

It is too early to offer a definitive judgment about the new MOMA. But walking through Mr. Taniguchi's mammoth atrium and trying to get our bearings among the acres of blindingly white walls, we recalled something that André Malraux said about museums in his book *The Voices of Silence.* During the course of the nineteenth century, Malraux wrote, museums became so much a part of our experience that "we forget they have imposed on the spectator a wholly new attitude towards the work of art. For they have tended to estrange the works they bring together from their original functions and to transform even portraits into 'pictures.'" What Malraux had in mind was a process of *aestheticizing*: objects that might have had their home in ritual or religion, say, were now appreciated in quite a different way, as instruments of aesthetic delectation. What we see happening in institutions like MOMA is a later, perhaps a parodic, stage of this process. There is, as it were, a second estrangement, whereby objects that had their home in the realm of art are regarded as ironic, if valuable, tokens of cultural exchange. The aim is no longer artistic, even if the project is undertaken in the name of art. On the contrary, it is fundamentally an *anti*-artistic project that cannibalizes art for the sake of generically cultural entertainments.

Perhaps an anecdote can clarify the sort of change that has taken place at MOMA over the past few decades. We remember asking a beautiful and urbane friend where she met her husband. "Oh, he picked me up in the Museum of Modern Art," she said. Yes, of course. MOMA was a famously romantic venue. It is possible, of course, that it will continue to be a place of assignation. But the romance, alas, is quite gone.

"An exemplar of rehabilitation"?

From the standpoint of public relations, it has been a bad couple of seasons for Hamilton College, the small, elite liberal arts institution in Clinton, New York. A few years ago, a visiting professor of chemistry stepped down after it was revealed that she was endeavoring to clone a baby with the help of a group that believed in extraterrestrials. In the fall of 2002, Eugene Tobin, an historian and the college's president for ten years, stepped down after admitting to plagiarizing parts of his speeches. (Is plagiarism bad for your career? Not necessarily: *The Chronicle of Higher Education* recently reported that President Tobin had been one of the highest paid college administrators in the country. Shortly after leaving Hamilton, Mr. Tobin

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joined the Andrew Mellon Foundation as a senior advisor.)

Hamilton offers more than extraterrestrials and college leaders who betray some central tenets of scholarly ethics, however. Consider, for example, its recent appointment of Susan Rosenberg, formerly of the Weather Underground, to teach "Resistance Memoirs: Writing, Identity and Change," a month-long, credit-bearing seminar as an "artist- and activist-in-residence." Remember the Weathermen? A couple of their members inadvertently blew up a townhouse (and themselves) in Greenwich Village in 1970. The remnants of the group—which included such poster-children of the radical Left as Kathy Boudin, Bill Ayers, and Bernadine Dohrn—went underground (and changed their name accordingly) as they continued their struggle against The System. A bomb here, a bomb there: they did their best to disrupt the society they hated. With unfortunate but admonitory timing, *The New York Times* ran a flattering profile of Mr. Ayers on September 11, 2001: "I don't regret setting bombs," Ayers said. "I feel we didn't do enough." Yes, well. Others have stepped in to help you, Mr. Ayers.

In 1981, Ms. Boudin and some of her associates held up a Brinks armored car near Nyack, New York. They murdered a Brinks guard and, in attempting their getaway, two police officers. A motto of the Weathermen and their associates was "the only good cop is a dead cop." They meant it. Susan Rosenberg was indicted for involvement with this crime. She wasn't prosecuted because, in 1984, she was sentenced to fifty-eight years for using false identification and possession of automatic weapons and 740 pounds of high explosives. "We're caught," she was quoted in *The New York Times* as saying, "but we're not defeated. Long live the armed struggle!" (That was in 1984. In 1993, she proclaimed proudly that "I am guilty of revolutionary anti-imperialist resistance" and explained that the FBI's "war" against the Black Liberation movement showed her "the necessity for armed self-defense.")

Ms. Rosenberg, who likes to describe herself as a "former U.S. political prisoner," served sixteen years in prison before President Clinton commuted her sentence just before leaving office in 2001. The person responsible for inviting Ms. Rosenberg to Hamilton is Nancy Rabinowitz, a professor of literature and director of the Kirkland Project for the Study of Gender, Society, and Culture, a semi-autonomous, left-wing redoubt within the college. The Hamilton College catalogue describes the Kirkland Project and lists "an artist/scholar-in-residence program." Professor Rabinowitz transformed that into an "artist/activist-in-residence" program, thus paving the way for felons, terrorists, and other such "activists" to visit Hamilton and instruct the 1700 undergraduates there in how to make the world a better place.

It is said that Ms. Rabinowitz was inspired to offer the seminar to Susan Rosenberg—whom she describes as "an exemplar of rehabilitation"—after hearing her lecture at Hamilton last spring. But it seems likely that Ms. Rabinowitz already knew Ms. Rosenberg. Nancy Rabinowitz is married to Peter Rabinowitz—also a faculty member at Hamilton—who is the son of Victor Rabinowitz, an attorney with the firm of Rabinowitz, Boudin, Standard, Krinsky, and Lieberman, whose clients have included the accused spy Judith Coplon, Daniel Ellsberg, the Berrigan brothers, Dr. Spock—and Kathy Boudin, a daughter of the firm's Boudin. Such filiations are, as the Marxists say, no accident.

Naturally, Susan Rosenberg's appointment at Hamilton has sparked controversy. The college seems to be circling its wagons. In a public statement, it insists that "Ms. Rosenberg is an award-winning writer, an activist, and a teacher who offers a unique perspective as a writer." 1) It is difficult to say exactly what Ms. Rosenberg has written—we've found no published books—or indeed to judge her qualifications since, to

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date, the college refuses to make her vita public. 2) To say that someone has a "unique perspective" is not to say very much. Timothy McVeigh might have had a "unique perspective." Would Hamilton have proposed hiring him?

Hamilton College is about to embark upon an ambitious fund-raising drive. Early in December, the college will inaugurate the campaign with a dinner at the New-York Historical Society. We are told that members of the New York City Police department intend to be on hand to protest Ms. Rosenberg's appointment. We don't blame them.

Business as usual

On October 6, *The Bookseller Daily*, an online service for the book trade, ran a symposium on the question "Is George W. Bush Good for the Book Business?" The Symposium took place during the Frankfurt Book Fair, the huge international jamboree for the publishing industry that takes place every autumn. The luster attached to Bush-bashing has dimmed significantly since November 2. Still, we think it worth recording some of the responses to the urgent question propounded by some senior publishing spokesmen:

> • Carole Blake, Joint Managing Director, Blake Friedmann (UK): "No matter how many books on him are being bought and sold, he's bad for the planet and mankind."
> • Ian Chapman, Managing Director, Simon and Schuster (UK): "I am deeply indebted to him for the significant amounts of turnover emanating from the absurdity of the man. . . . Other than that, I wish he would go away. He's dangerous."
> • Lynette Owen, Copyright Director, Pearson Education (UK): "Obviously, even if he is no good for anything else. Someone told me recently that more than 200 books have been written about Bush in the past three years. Frightening."
> • Pramod Kapoor, Publisher, Roli Books (India): "George W. Bush is good for a book industry. The comic book industry."

You get the recipe: mock gratitude propelled by contempt, leavened by self-righteousness. Similar responses were offered by the Managing Directors of Harperpress, UK, and Penguin, UK, as well as the Chief Executive of Faber and Faber, the publisher of Bloomsbury, the Publishing Director of Hesperus Press, and the Chief Executive Officer of Macmillan. It was business as usual in the elite publishing world of today: utterly predictable, wholesale, off-the-rack, one-size-fits-all Leftist sentiment. The one refreshingly discordant note came from the American sociologist and publisher Irving Louis Horowitz, whose letter, "A Parochial Symposium," ran in the TheBookseller.com on 22 October. "The symposium," Mr. Horowitz wrote, "raises serious questions about the imposition of ideology by British publishing executives, and creates an aura of uniformity that violates the spirit and practice of democratic culture."

> If these senior officials . . . had reserved even a fraction of the passion dedicated to this screed on George W. Bush for the victims of mass murder by terrorists in Russia, Israel, Spain, Thailand, and a dozen other lands, then one might at least imagine that the conscience of the publishing community was not dedicated to aping the worst instincts of the enemies of free societies.
>
> As matters stand, it would take a brave and hearty soul to dare express approval for current Anglo-American policies in a publishing community that cannot get enough of books denouncing the American colossus, imperium, dictatorship, fascist trends, etc., ad nauseam. A time will come when such posturing in print will be understood to have been itself the problem and not remotely the solution to political, military, and religious despotism the world over.

To which we can only add, Amen.

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The whys of art

by Robert Conquest

The troubles that beset the arts, though perhaps less amenable to diagnosis than those besetting the political and social order, may be thought relevant to the whole question of civilization. And their particular phenomena often seem to be melded with the attitudes one finds in those other fields.

Changes in art and cultural history have never been easy to assimilate to political or economic changes. But perhaps we have enough evidence to show that particular sub-ideologies, combined with or supported by a bureaucratic upsurge, have caused, or been associated with, what appear to be downhill trends. Different generations naturally engender different styles. No harm in that. Still, it can be argued that some fashions in the field are less troublesome than others.

In an analysis of this sort, one cannot exclude subjectivity. (And Wordsworth warned us against the "hope of *reasoning* [one] into approbation"). When a writer finds spokesmen of a new generation not susceptible to his or others' earlier work, several notions may occur to him. First, that tastes change. Francis T. Palgrave wrote, editing the second *Golden Treasury*, "nothing, it need scarcely to be said, is harder than to form an estimate, even remotely accurate, of one's own contemporary poets." So, to judge art and culture is indeed, in part, to make a more subjective assessment of the aesthetics, which is of taste. And if one asserts that a current trend or current trends are negative, one is, of course, open to the retort that, in various epochs, changes of taste have emerged deplored by the representatives of earlier trends but later seen as having their own value. True, but it is equally true that some striking and popular new art has soon proved no more than a regrettable and temporary fad—as with the once universally acclaimed Ossian or the German poet Friedrich Klopstock.

Moreover, our cultural people, in the sense of producers of the arts defined as creative, are now in a strong and unprecedented relationship with the bureaucratic or establishmentarian world discussed earlier. (This is, paradoxically, at a time when many of these cultural people have entered a period of what one might call ostentatious transgressiveness, something on which indeed both they and their state, official, and academic sponsors pride themselves.) Of course, there is no reason to think that sections of the intelligentsia are any sounder on the arts than they are on politics or history. And, here again, they, as a phenomenon, form a far larger social stratum than at any time in the past. It might be argued that, as with the personnel of the state apparatus proper, there is now such a superfluity of the artistically and literary "educated" class that their very number is part of the means of coping with, and employing part of, the product.

There comes to a point, hard to define specifically but more or less obvious, when a regrettable general impression is unarguably

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convincing—well, not "unarguably," yet beyond serious debate. Still, an organism, or a polity, may present faults seen as lethal that are in practice comfortably contained and do not require therapy. Nor would one want there to be any implied use of power from outside institutions or individuals.

Even apart from analytics, a great deal of nonsense has been talked or written about art, or rather Art. Some reflections seem to be in order. The question of what constitutes "art," and what distinguishes good from less good art, is an old one. We can be certain that humanity was creating what we call art long before the word or the concept existed. And—a further complication—how is it that we all accept that some Paleolithic paintings are among the best of their kind and excel by any standards? Well, not all; there are presumably those who are beyond such acceptance. And in considering the paintings of Lascaux, Altamira, and elsewhere, the question arises: What did their creators *think* they were doing?

Not decorating—they did not live in the caves. So why did these men go deep into them, too deep to see, and paint by the light of cedar wicks set in grease-filled hollow stones? Why are the hooves of many, but not all, the cattle shown in twisted perspective?

"Magic" is a word often used of all this. But it is indisputable that this was not the "hunting magic" found in later, and more distant, "primitive" depictions. "Religious" is also often applied. But magic or religious in what way? We simply don't know—but one thing seems obvious: they did not think of their painting as something called "art." This point was reinforced a few years ago by an interview with a Nigerian village sculptor of some fine formal statuettes, I suppose you would call them. Asked why he carved them, he could only reply that this is what he did.

Thucydides tells us, quoting Pericles, that the Athenians "philokaloumen . . . kai philosophoumen," love both beauty and wisdom. Can the modern age combine philosophy and philokaly?

One problem, nowadays, is the sort of art in which "beauty" is not merely abandoned but replaced by a positive addiction to the unbeautiful, or the antibeautiful. It is true that "beauty" became sentimentalized and cosmetic from the early nineteenth century. So it is possible that we have now broadened and deepened the idea. One can see today, for example, the view of Verdi as among the finest; a commentator in *The New Yorker* (September 24, 2001) said of a new performance of *Otello* that it was astonishingly—and unanalyzably—moving, "stripped of directorial brainstorms and interpretive ego trips with no attempt to deconstruct or recontextualize." But, as Joseph Brodsky noted (of Ezra Pound), "beauty" must arise of itself and cannot just be added from outside.

When a Greek used *kalos*, which we conventionally translate as "beautiful," of a city, or a weapon, or a harbor, or a virtue, we feel that his judgment of the practical and the moral was essentially aesthetic. But this was not so. He did not differentiate the categories. *Kalos* meant, in effect, "admirable" or "fine." Similarly, *arete*, which we translate as "virtue," was used of everything from a racehorse's speed to the skills of a fighter or an orator and is better translated simply as "excellence." In the Renaissance, there was a natural attempt to revive this attitude with the concept of *virtù*, but the distinction between goodness and beauty was already so firmly established that reaction from it led mainly to a mere conscious amoralism.

We, or others, have used the word "art" of a wide range of human action (as in the Art of War, the Art of Love). All the same, we differentiate between various skills and the value we give to each. Even though we may speak of "trapeze art," its artistry depends wholly on a skill. If a practitioner regularly falls, he will not be admired. (One could argue—indeed, I would—that in our days there are "artists" who, in effect, do regularly fall into the arena and yet do not forfeit their prestige.) William Hazlitt, of course, wrote similarly of Indian jugglers. On a slightly different level, I remember in the

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mid-1970s watching no television but the odd opera and Joe Montana playing for the 49ers. I was not deeply interested in American football as such, but in seeing this combination of, I suppose, skill and judgment. . . .

In the broader context, medieval Scandinavians can be cited as having had a wide range of skills, some of them "artistic" in the modern usage: arts, the law, the accumulated skills and experience of brilliant shipbuilding and shipsailing, and the making and handling of weapons. It is not that the main arts—narrative prose and gnomic verse—required any less sophistication than those of the present day; there were simply less of them. Fewer people were doing fewer things. This was as true culturally as it was socially. We may feel that Earl Rognvald of Orkney, boasting eight hundred years ago of his nine skills—as draughts player, runner, reader, smith, skier, archer, oarsman, poet, and harper—set a standard towards which we should all strive. All the same, such comprehensive mastery was exceptional even then. And nowadays, with an immense range of skills to be mastered, an enormous spectrum of individuality seeking an ever-wider variety in the arts, and a huge and diversely specialized volume of knowledge, any oneness we can expect in our culture cannot possibly be that of the centralized and unitary.

A certain amount of scientific knowledge on the part of writers is desirable as a matter of mere literacy. We can go further and expect some of this knowledge actually to enter imaginative literature. When Quintilian says in the *Institutio oratoria* that knowledge of astronomy is essential to a proper understanding of poets, he is describing a culture in which some such merging of science and art applied. Yet even if that were regained, it would be an illusion to think that we could ever revive the full classical unity and interconnectedness of all the fields of knowledge, when a Greek geometer could put forward the proposition "I cannot demonstrate the properties of a triangle without the aid of Venus."

The minds that produce and variegate our culture form part of a large spectrum. And when we speak of art, we should be wary of certain high-decibel voices ringing out with claims about it or about one or another contributor to its bulk. In particular, we should beware of some efforts truly to represent it, to stand as icons of its significance. Pretensions to, or perhaps better seen as projections of, high souldom, are, generally speaking, to be rejected. "Creativity" is a well-known dazzler. And as Anthony Powell put it in *A Writer's Notebook*, "It is a rule, almost without exception, that writers and painters who are always talking about being artists, break down at just that level." A heavy self-conscious solemnity is another symptom. In fact, low seriousness is a mark of every epoch. Apart from its role in silencing merited rejection, it is also to be seen as narrowing the grasp of the arts by blocking their lighter side. Proust noted (of Saint-Loup) that it is a philistinism to judge the arts by their intellectual content, "not perceiving the enchantments of its imagination that give me some things that he judges frivolous."

The more constrictive tendencies always start among a minority, an extremely small minority, even of the artistic or literary strata. Then, at some point, they spill over into intellectually or aesthetically more passive, though argumentatively even more active, personalities.

As for the art- and literature-consuming public, it is persuaded, or even deafened, by a small stratum. The difference between the way this has happened in the past and the way it is happening now is that this intermediate caste has increased in number and in power, and has to some extent adopted, or been penetrated by, the same sociopolitical ideologies whose mental estrangement from good sense we have already deplored.

Constant Lambert, the British conductor and composer, is recorded as saying that even among what we would now call the high artistic intelligentsia, it was very rare to find one who was adept or interested in all

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of the arts. In what follows, we will concentrate on literature and, more specifically, verse. The examples given here could certainly be matched in other fields, but should suffice for our purposes.

Anthony Burgess said flatly that "Art begins with craft, and there is no art until craft has been mastered." There are several ways, in writing, as in the other arts, in which the decoupling of craft and art may be accomplished. Explosively intended phrases tend to distract attention from any broader pattern. But a less sensational shift of direction may also serve, if a mood is created or titillated without concern for anything accomplished. As Dr. Johnson said of James Macpherson's supposed translation of the poetry of Ossian, "Sir, a man might write such stuff forever, if he would abandon his mind to it."

One new phenomenon of our time was the establishment of English schools and departments in the universities at about the same time as "modernism" arose. For the first time, we had a specific and separate group that was supposed to be exceptionally qualified to judge literature, as against that larger, more heterogeneous set of people constituting the cultural community. Literature was moreover beset by theory, and in general by an excess of academicism and discussionizing. As in other fields, many were and are simply misled by words. A local paper speaks of those "eating the menu instead of the meal." Academic critics claimed to be the only ones competent to discuss poetry properly and indeed to prescribe its forms, methods, and contents. This is as if a claim should be put forward that only professors of ballistics should discuss cricket or football. The American poet Karl Shapiro remarked that though he knew scores of poets, he almost never heard from them the adulation of Eliot that is found in the textbooks.

The past had dictatorial critics, but these have always been the more troublesome to the degree that they were systematic. No doubt, then and now, nondogmatic criticism contains a congeries of more or less unconscious assumptions. But that is not the same thing, just as those people are wrong who say that conscious and systematic political indoctrination is all right since in any case we are subject to unsystematic indoctrination in the set of assumptions implicit in our society.

The answer is that a supposedly full and conscious conceptualization is, even in so far as it may be successful at all, a narrower and shallower matter than the other; that it goes with an authoritarian attitude; that its products, because of the formality of their definition, are more solidified and less able to evolve. Just as it is those people who think they have discovered the laws of history who have, in our time, caused our major public catastrophes, so, in a lesser field, it is those who think they have discovered the laws of literature who have been the trouble.

But it should also be said that there is an element of illusion in these conceptualizations. Since it is impossible to achieve the pretended rigor, an element of unconscious prejudice after all remains; in fact, it is corrupted through repression and rationalization into something less, rather than more, rational. The more "rigor," the greater the belief that what is "rigorously" covered is the main and major matter, while in reality, it may simply be that part of the subject most susceptible to analysis. Obscurer but profounder aspects of a work then tend to be forgotten.

We may also feel that the bringing to the analytic consciousness of all one's attitudes to a piece of writing, even if it were possible, is not an unmixed advantage. A psyche that is entirely conscious (or with a subconscious component subject to instant recall) does not seem to be in accord with the present design of *Homo sapiens*; even if an android with these characteristics could be produced, one suspects that it might not be wholly satisfactory. To put it in terms of the arts, we might consider A. E. Housman's view that poetry finds its way "to something in man which is obscure and

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latent, something older than the present organization of his nature, like the patches of fen which still linger here and there in the drained lands of Cambridgeshire." The rules of these profound and intricate unconscious activities are probably in practice unknowable. At any rate, if not unknowable, much of their working is at present unknown. If the vague, peripheral, and hypothetical knowledge we have is given the status of law, we are worse off than before.

Literature exists for the ordinary educated man, and any literature that actively requires enormous training can be at best of only peripheral value. Moreover, such a style in literature produces the specialist who knows only about literature. The man who knows only about literature does not know even about literature.

Common in all academic circles is the assumption that argument put forward with careful definition and meticulous analysis is automatically superior to more general argument in more ordinary language. The analyst is inclined to assume that anyone who is content to use such more general formulae does so because he is incapable of finding distinctions, untrained in the minutiae of new methods of analysis, and in general all thumbs. And he even feels perhaps that he has demolished a large-scale argument by dissecting, qualifying, and distinguishing, i.e., proving that there is more to be said. This is rather like a microscope trying to refute a telescope. It is basically an error about semantics. Language is capable of being used in either way, and neither is intrinsically superior to the other—as long as the operator is aware of what he is doing, and the method is suitable to the material. We find, in fact, that a general treatment, without pretense of finality but rather, as it were, open-ended, is the preferable approach to literature.

One also sees it argued that the more one knows about a work of art, the better one is equipped to judge it aesthetically. In theory, this sounds all right. But even if we neglect the fact that much critical "knowledge" of a poem is in effect not knowledge at all but patterns imposed on the poem by the critic, a little common sense will tell us that things are not as easy as all that. Are we really to suppose that a modern expert on painting, able to analyze brushwork with a microscope and to identify the chemicals used, is a better judge of painting than were the great patrons of the Renaissance? Knowledge does not necessarily imply judgment. All truly critical, as against technical, argument is either intuitive or hypothetical or partial. This cannot be compensated for by a study of the raw material, however exhaustive.

The first great age of analytical criticism, the Alexandrian, produced among its frigidities some of the aberrations we have today—its brand of concrete poetry, for example, of which Henry Fuseli wrote: "The wing, the harp, the hatchet, the altar of Simmias were the dregs of a degraded nation's worn-out taste." But it is easy to see how the critical temper may promote meaningless drivel. One of superb Rimbaud's worst poems is the sonnet in which he allots various colors to the vowels. Critics were instantly found to give coherent interpretations (eight or ten were propounded in all), though, as Paul Verlaine tells us, Rimbaud "se foutait pas mal si A était rouge ou vert." But his "Sonnet des Voyelles," just because it was interpretation fodder, became the favorite and most quoted of the lot. That was in primitive times, when criticism had not yet reached its zenith. Still, even nowadays, the most ambiguous (or complicated-appearing) poetry often pleases the critic best. Whereas, in any reasonable sense, the more incomprehensible the poem, the worse it must be.

It also seems to be felt that emotionalism proves emotion, and that nonsense is aesthetically preferable to sense. Things have changed since Sophocles was able to establish his sanity in old age by reciting to a court the newly written *Colonus*. I cannot feel that the point is irrelevant, any more than is Coleridge's unforgettable remark about Shakespeare that "his rhythm is so

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perfect, that you may be almost sure that you do not understand the real force of a line, if it does not run well as you read it."

It seems odd that a taste for involved intellectualism in literature should so often be accompanied, or succeeded, by a taste for the most extreme irrationalism. The writer A. G. Macdonell, reviewing novels in the mid-1920s, noted such a change in the titles: "Slashing" ones like *Rat-Ridden, Bilge-Bestank* gave way to a more "Shadowy" lot, like *And She Said So Too*. But on second thoughts, it will be seen that this is natural: the two approaches both involve, in most cases, contrivance, in its shallowest sense. We think of art from the intellect as clear, arid, formal. Obviously, this is not always so: *anything*, however emotionalist, which is devised to suit a conscious scheme is intellectual, in this bad sense. Hysteria is the product of frigidity, not of passion. Both extreme cases are often, it will be noted, missionary types: the one of a highly organized and ritualistic set of sacramental forms, the other of a theology of revivalist self-abandon. In either case, a sectarianism.

One finds a political element, or at any rate a political tone, in these literary discussions—with an occasional lack of amenity. How George Orwell would have relished Anthony Hecht telling (in the introduction to his *Melodies Unheard*) of opponents of meter and rhyme that "one such radical has recently affirmed" that anyone that observes such constraints "is unambiguously a fascist."

One of the ways to give the impression of an aesthetic performance to those lacking the organ of taste is indeed to put into a work of art the political, religious, or other extraneous satisfactions popular with one or another audience. Particularly, of course, if strongly held. As Paul Valéry wrote, "Enthusiasm is not an artist's state of mind."

Few poets have had much experience of the political. They have generous impulses, no doubt, and concern for humanity. These can be expressed in various ways and are not sufficient for a poem involving facts. On political issues, it is extremely rare for the facts to be so clear, and the human involvement so direct and simple, as to approach the immediacy and undeniability of experience. Still, there can be few comments as inept as that of William Carlos Williams, in his introduction to Allen Ginsberg, that this Beat poet had gone "into his Golgotha, from that charnel house, similar in every way, to that of the Jews in the past war."

Not that even those few poets with some political knowledge and experience find it easy to produce political poems. Lawrence Durrell, one of those few, has dealt directly with political events in prose, in *Bitter Lemons*. But in the poem which concludes this book, as soon as he approaches the subject, he has the modesty, a sense of the subject's intractability, to write: "Better leave the rest unsaid." Excellent advice, for several reasons.

There is an idea that expressing any reputable sentiment or opinion on politics makes good verse. No. In particular, apart from satire, there is almost no good political verse in English (except for Andrew Marvell's "Horatian Ode"). J. C. Furnas in his book on—and against—slavery, *The Road to Harper's Ferry*, says, "Blake, Cowper, Wordsworth and Southey, when touching on slavery, wrote drivel." I have come across one good poem about the nuclear bomb—by the Irish poet Thomas Kinsella (not a "political" sort of poem, actually). None of the hundreds on the death of Dylan Thomas is any good (and please don't let us speak of Princess Diana). On AIDS, there are a few good poems by Thom Gunn—a great exception.

Back in the first and second decades of this century, there was indeed a ferment of revolutionary-sounding attitudes, and these attracted precisely some of the *aesthetically* radical—Marinetti into Fascism, Mayakovsky into Bolshevism. Enmity of artists to "capitalism" and the "bourgeoisie" is a symptom of this radical temperament. Of course, the notion that capitalism is hostile to art is in itself absurd. In fact, capitalist or bourgeois patronage has often marked a great flowering of art: the Medicis, Venice,

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and Holland, or, to go further back, the great merchant republic of Athens.

The Mexican painters like Diego Rivera well illustrate one aspect of political modernism. And it is clear that an important part of the impact of their "new" art was due far more to the political type of content than to the quasi cubism involved in the forms chosen. In the palace at Chapultepec, one may see romantic revolutionary paintings of a century ago, showing liberators like Benito Juárez and Porfirio Díaz cursing venomous foes, etc., to the applause and enthusiasm of romantically conceived peasants and of "the people" in general. The difference between these and the more modern Mexican paintings is not great, and indeed the later generation owes a good deal not merely to this political inheritance but also to an element of primitivism already to be seen in the work of their predecessors.

In fact, art with a revolutionary political component is very much a traditionalist form. The only exception I have come across, where a genuine new impulse seems visible, is in the strange statuary of Kemalist Turkey, with its earthy New Turks pushing up out of the soil. Here, perhaps, novelty may be due to a total lack of previous representational art. On a slightly different point, one of the truly remarkable things about the Mayan cities—Uxmal, in particular—is what one may (inadequately) call the elegance of the shapes and dispositions of the buildings (in a way like the Greek equivalent).

Literature is written in language. That language has a close relationship to common speech. To "heighten" speech is not in fact to depart from it more than very slightly. When poetry goes bad, from the point of view of language, it is invariably due to the creation of "poeticism"—a vocabulary, or diction, or general phraseology of an isolated type. This has usually in the past taken the form of certain words becoming traditional in poetry at the same time as they became obsolete in common speech. But it is also possible—and this is the form the vice took in the twentieth century—to depart from the true roots by *creating* linguistic forms equally separated from the natural language and equally to be regarded as poeticisms.

We distinguish poetry from prose. There are poetry magazines, poetry anthologies, and so on that may print the occasional confessedly "prose poem," but their contents and claims, generally speaking, differ from what is usually designated "prose." So it seems that poetry is a particular art and, presumably, in some sense a particular craft. Traditionally, prosody sought, as Baudelaire put it, "the immortal needs of monotony, of symmetry and of surprise"; or, if we need an English equivalent, there is Dr. Johnson's "To write verse is to dispose syllables and sounds harmonically by some known and settled rule—a rule however lax enough to substitute similitude for identity, to admit change without breach of order, and to relieve the ear without disappointing it."

Of course, there has long been within or adjacent to such verse a subordinate or complementary tradition of something closer to prose, but this was always, until recently, peripheral to and dependent on the main tradition. Even in Johnson's time, his friend Christopher Smart, whose "Song to David" is a fine example of a long, wholly formal poem, also wrote that fine, free apostrophe to his cat Jeoffrey. To some extent based on the psalms, or on a sort of loose or resolved hexameter, this genre was often not even that, but better seen as declamation. Clearly some of this what we might call declamatory verse is successful.

But after all, prose too may be typographically broken up into lines for some particular effect. We have the notes from which Churchill made his speech to a secret session of the House of Commons in 1940. After quoting a call to man Britain's defenses and resist the then threatened German landings, the notes go on:

> That will play its part;
> but essence of defence of Britain
> is to attack the landed enemy at once,

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leap at his throat
and keep the grip until the life is out of
him.

This might, in some sense, be called an art, perhaps of rhetoric. But in what sense is it prose? At any rate, it shows how the two arts meet at a not readily definable point.

It can be brilliantly used: for example, in the tenser and more dramatic passages of David Jones's magnificent *In Parenthesis*, the best book produced by World War I (though we may note that Jones did not call his work poetry but just a "writing"). It has produced terrible stuff too: Martin Tupper, highly respected in mid-Victorian times, is an example.

Freeish verse has been with us for some generations (when I was young, my sister's school magazine was full if it). Most poets of this century have written it, sometimes only rarely. Again, successes are possible, though uncommon—Robert Frost compared writing free verse to playing "tennis without a net"—and again, it depends for its effect on being under the protection of the guns of the main tradition.

Modernism, in the broadest sense, was largely an import from France, starting with impressionism. As Anthony Powell commented in *A Writer's Notebook*, it is extraordinary that "after Turner, Impressionism seemed altogether new; and 'modern poetry' after Browning." (Indeed, most of the tropes of symbolism, for example, are to be found in Shakespeare.) But the new artistic evolution seems to have been that French models impressed those who wrote in English. But the French had quite a different history.

Which may remind us that there was also an element, and often a very attractive one, of joking in the early Paris's avant-garde. And further West, one finds the saving note of the comic not only in E. E. Cummings but also in Dylan Thomas, for example (even at his most portentous, he seems to fit Lautréamont's description of Byron, "L'hippotame des jungles infernales": more sympathetic, even as a monster, than the tyrannosaurs later infesting Bohemia).

Stéphane Mallarmé, the true avatar of symbolism, wrote specifically of the new "dissonances" that the background of "strict" verse is needed to make them "profitable." This sensible rule was not (and is not) observed. And the "experimentation," as Mallarmé suggests, went beyond the technical into the whole approach, when every sort of grammatical, structural, and semantic novelty was tried out. Certain benefits resulted—acceptable variations in structure, half rhymes. It was no less a product of classicism than when Edward Gibbon himself spoke of the alternative aims of poetry being to "satisfy, or silence, our reason."

The crux, the main and major disjunction in all fields, was when the artist took the decision to abandon the laity. As Pasternak wrote later, "All this writing of the Twenties has terribly aged. They lacked universality. I have never understood these dreams of a new language, of a completely original form of expression. Because of this dream, much of the work of the Twenties which was stylistic experimentation has ceased to exist."

In fact, many writers classed as modernist were merely modern. Which is not to say that they were not affected by experimentalism proper, to various degrees. But with this notion of artistic alienation came the similar, but logically distinct, element of the existential human in his condition; and with the twentieth century, though deriving from earlier thought, came angst.

It may be argued that artistic alienation had been around for generations, ever since the "superfluous man" of Mikhail Lermontov, the Byron of Continental imagination, the romantic idea of the mad or maddish poet grandly isolated from the rest of mankind. As W. H. Auden put it, nearly two generations ago:

Chimeras mauled them, they wasted away
with the spleen,
Suicide picked them off, sunk off Cape
Consumption,

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Lost on the Tosspot Seas, wrecked on the
Gibbering Isles
Or trapped in the ice of despair at the Soul's
Pole.

In any case, when we look back, we can surely say that the great revolution modernism thought it was bringing about simply failed.

Yet that is not the whole story. First of all, even if they were not as world-shaking as they imagined, they might still have left us some valuable, if peripheral, work. Such a modest contribution, after all, is all that Mallarmé claimed—that for his classical verse was "the great nave of the 'basilica' French poetry," while *vers libre* simply created special attractions on the sidelines.

Lionel Trilling noted how a contrary demand excessively catered to in his time was for verse that advertised itself as being under high pressure. Some verse of that type may indeed be successful. But mere groaning and sweating and thrashing around, with adjectives to suit, simply begs for D. J. Enright's comment: "the effects may be striking but they don't strike very deep." And this is, or can easily become, bad taste—as Wordsworth put it, a "degrading thirst after outrageous stimulation." Nor will it do to attribute this sort of thing to a more "primitive"—and therefore more true and real—depth of feeling. Yet, as I write, I come across a poetry reviewer in the *Economist* praising "a raw vigorous celebration of instinctive animal energy." (The cave paintings, too, were subtle and civilized compared with what is now exhibited at the Royal Academy.)

Much has been published over the past decade or two that has something of the appearance of form, but relaxed, or dissolved, to the degree that it is really no more than an overextended type of free verse. We have indeed noted that this can also be said of verse reaching us from the other pole of arid academicism. There are, of course, many people on all sides who are in one way or another interested in poetry but not for poetical reasons.

Kingsley Amis once wrote me, "The trouble with chaps like that is that they have no taste—I don't mean bad taste, just the mental organ that makes you say This is bloody good or This is piss is simply missing, and they have to orientate themselves by things like 'importance' and 'seriousness' and 'depth' and 'originality' and 'consensus' (= 'trend')."

Even if its proponents did not say that all obscurity is profound—and some came near to saying that—they certainly implied that all profundity is obscure. But a muddy puddle may pretend to any depth; a clear pool cannot. Coleridge writes somewhere that he read one of Dante's shorter poems every year for ten years, always finding more in it. This did not mean that it lacked comprehensibility at first reading, merely that in this comprehensibility there were resonances that did not immediately declare themselves.

This "death of the past" includes ignorance of the cultural knowledge that would have been taken for granted from Chaucer to Auden. One example: Byron's "The Isles of Greece" required some, though not much, background. The assumed historical knowledge in the lines "A king sate on the rocky brow/ Which looks o'er sea-born Salamis"—not even knowledge, only literacy—is now largely forgotten (and the oddity of "Salamis" pronounced as if the plural of an Italian sausage might have been avoided by a parallel grip on scansion).

More generally, how widespread is this anticultural plague? I was talking to an aging and not in the least anti-intellectual Los Angeles businessman. He said that he had been schooled, and honed, in a certain ambience of the old anthologies (*The Golden Treasury, The Oxford Book of English Verse*) and other such inheritances, but that his children, still less his grandchildren, no longer seemed to have this access.

In the 1990s, television carried a replay of the 1940s Western movie *My Darling Clementine*, in the course of which a traveling actor playing Hamlet is terrorized by

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bad guys in a saloon, who make him stand on a table, shoot at bottles behind him, and order him to act something. He starts, "To be or not to be," but dries up. Doc Holliday comes in and finishes the speech for him. This shows that half a century ago Hollywood producers thought that all this would be acceptable and comprehensible to the movie public. In the intervening years, a generation has been miseducated, as we all know, in many different ways. And one of these is that there is (or so it seems) no longer a general memory not only of meter and rhyme but also even of their earlier existence. Craft, it might be said, has been painted into a corner.

There are indeed many voices, including young ones, that have called for and started a return to verse. The persistence of form and rhythm and rhyme in the general population, as in country music, is perhaps a sign of their ineradicability. And "light verse" has been, on the whole, a bastion of form.

It is true that a decline in the craft of verse has been noted before. Edmund Wilson's "Is Verse a Dying Technique?" appeared in the late 1920s. Still, the then wave of free verse was only a peripheral fashion. We were not simultaneously untaught the older poets. And there were no creative-writing classes, and few experimental-academic versifiers, or, at any rate, far fewer and less obtrusive than today.

Over the ages, the condition of the arts has been seen as a part—a striking and important part—of the exercise of the critical imagination, of the human mind, in their broader compass. And the record of those faculties has seen contractions and contortions as well as periods of progress.

Will the humanities nevertheless prosper? Such a view perhaps underestimates, as ever, the power of inertia and interests. In Anatole France's *Thaïs*, faced with the (to him) irrational spectacle of a Pillar Saint—up on his pillar—the Roman governor's secretary says, "There are forces, Lucius, infinitely more powerful than reason and science." "Which?" "Ignorance and madness"—and the saint was an "educated" man. Moreover, his views were to conquer. In Rudyard Kipling's words:

> And they overlaid the teaching of Ionia
> And the Truth was choked at birth
>
> . . . to rise again many years later.
> Let us hope for the best.

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MOMA reopened

by Michael J. Lewis

One weakness of modernist architecture that was not recognized at first was the question of the addition. For the great buildings of the past this was not a problem. Organized along a lattice of monumental axes, they could simply thrust those axes farther into space, and grow. Both the Louvre and the Metropolitan Museum of Art grew in this manner, and transformed themselves from compact blocks into leviathans with no loss of legibility or coherence. Strangely enough, modern architecture—for all its celebration of the free plan—is not so free, at least not in this respect. The free plan might indeed be polished to a kind of crystalline perfection, as in Mies van der Rohe's Barcelona Pavilion, but the moment one tries to add to it, and alter the invisible calculus of its equilibrium, the building falls apart. If one extends the axes of movement, it becomes a pinwheel; if one multiplies them, it becomes a labyrinth. Things are no better on the exterior. To the extent that a modernist building is also a work of abstract sculpture, then every addition is a disfigurement—or so recent controversy over proposed additions to Louis Kahn's Kimbell Museum and Marcel Breuer's Whitney Museum has shown.

Strangely, the museum most intimately associated with the course of modern architecture, the Museum of Modern Art in New York, has never been embarrassed by additions. MOMA itself, after all, is nothing but a loose congeries of additions, huddling companionably around its sculpture garden. It has never possessed, except in its earliest years, a singular, pristine form, one which its trustees felt obliged to protect. Soon after its construction in 1939, the original Philip Goodwin and Edward Durell Stone building on West Fifty-third Street was joined by a west wing (1949), the celebrated sculpture garden (1952), the east wing (1964), and a fifty-four-story tower on the site of the west wing (1979). The first three were by Philip Johnson, whose spare, cool modernism lent the ensemble a vestige of architectural unity.

Despite this tradition, there was uncertainty in 1997 when the Japanese architect Yoshio Taniguchi was commissioned to enlarge MOMA yet again. This addition was to be of another magnitude entirely than its predecessors; furthermore, architectural modernism no longer meant what it did even two decades ago. Would Taniguchi defer to the existing architecture, demonstrating MOMA's cultural respect for itself as a landmark of modernism? Or would he intervene ruthlessly and without sentimentality to create something fresh and original, demonstrating MOMA's commitment to the art of the present? In other words, would the new MOMA be a contemporary or a modern building? These terms were no longer interchangeable, as they had been in 1939. As can be seen in the lavishly renovated building, which opened to the public this November 20, MOMA has tried to have it both ways.

Architectural modernism, in its canonical form, is in some sense the creation of MOMA.

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It was there where the first comprehensive exhibition of modern architecture was held in 1932, which coined the term International Style. One of the curators of that exhibition was Johnson, who for a good half century dominated MOMA's architectural scene—as architect, donor, and impresario—when it was the arbiter of modernist orthodoxy in America. From the very outset, the museum endorsed a particular strand of modernism, preferring the intellectually strenuous and purist work of Gropius, Mies van der Rohe, and LeCorbusier while disdaining anything smacking of expressionism or willful individualism, such as the work of Wright. Through its prestige and influence, MOMA helped make this specific variant of modernism the dominant one in postwar America.

But in time MOMA helped to topple modernist orthodoxy, and to summon the fleshpots of postmodernism. In 1966, MOMA published Robert Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*; a decade later, the curator Arthur Drexler organized an influential exhibition of the architecture of the Ecole des Beaux Arts—i.e., the very tradition of academic classicism against which modernism in its early decades recoiled. But while providing the theoretical basis for a critique of modernist orthodoxy, MOMA itself never drew its architectural consequences; it studiously avoided the lighthearted historicism of postmodernism, even as Johnson himself playfully indulged in its freedoms. At the point where contemporary architecture diverged from modernism, MOMA's curatorial and architectural decisions also began to diverge.

When Glenn D. Lowry became director of MOMA in 1995, it was clear that the museum had once again outgrown its cramped precincts. He acted swiftly. Within two years he secured permission to build on the site of the former Dorset Hotel, to the west of the museum; a building committee was mobilized and ten architects were invited to submit preliminary ideas. A $858-million capital campaign was launched, much of which was spent on the MOMA Queens branch, where the museum found temporary lodgings from 2002 and 2004, and which remains a storage facility. The MOMA building itself would eventually cost $425 million.

This was a heady time for museum-building, with the parallel building campaigns of the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao and the Getty in Los Angeles enjoying extravagant publicity and anticipation. These projects were not only important as architectural prototypes; they also suggested that there was a vast new audience of potential visitors who, if they could not be reached by art, might be lured in by sensation and spectacle, and by the thrill of a new kind of public meeting space. Of course, this was a sore point for MOMA, which—having been built piecemeal—had no memorable interior spaces, apart from the sculpture garden.

In one crucial respect, Lowry avoided the example of the new Getty and Guggenheim. Their architects, Richard Meier and Frank Gehry, were conspicuously absent from his shortlist, which was free to an unusual extent of signature architects—those known for their idiosyncratic and instantly recognizable personal styles. With one or two exceptions, Lowry's list was tilted toward the elegant professional wing of the architectural spectrum rather than its celebrity wing, and most were from overseas. Here was the first indication that MOMA viewed the project as one of logistics and problem-solving, and not merely one of image-making.

Nonetheless, most of the competitors concentrated on placing some sort of startling object on the skyline. Rem Koolhaas envisioned a knife-edged prism of a tower; Bernard Tschumi a squat trapezoidal wedge; Stephen Holl a kind of triangular ziggurat. Their motivation is quite clear. MOMA commands a terrific amount of real estate but it is essentially landlocked, squeezed into the middle of a city block and lacking a prominent corner. And without a corner to give it a presence in the round, its architectural expression would be limited to what one can do within the field of a planar façade.

In retrospect, it is easy to see why the victory went to Taniguchi, a relative unknown.

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His spare, elegant design was easily the most reticent and understated of the proposals, and utterly free of swagger. It is noteworthy that the museum found its architect in Japan, perhaps the one country in the world where high modernism remains something of a living language, used sincerely without distancing gestures of irony or archness. Moreover, in our age of celebrity architects, it offers one value that is in critically short supply: self-effacement. This was certainly the case with Taniguchi, whose design also had a curiously impersonal quality, which placed it firmly in the MOMA lineage of cool modernism.

But in another sense, Taniguchi was far more audacious than his competitors. Instead of an addition, his renovation is a kind of architectural root canal, clearing out the building right to its perimeter walls. Only this would give him the elbow room to insert the spaces of monumental scale that MOMA has never had, adequate even for the demands of large-scaled contemporary sculpture; only this would give MOMA a comprehensive formal unity. Here Taniguchi has solved the dilemma of the addition in the most elegant fashion of all, by eliminating the original and placing an entirely new building on its site.

Although MOMA by now commands an enormous amount of frontage on both streets, Taniguchi made no effort to give it a unified monumental expression. He accepted its character as an ordered ensemble of rectilinear parts, retaining Johnson's east wing and Goodwin and Stone's original 1939 façade (which survives as a kind of decorative frontispiece, although its interior has long since vanished). His own façades are essays in the same spirit and are reticent to a fault. These are blank-walled affairs, revetted in black granite from Zimbabwe, a material that recedes visually when juxtaposed against anything brighter, such as the 1939 façade.

One of the most inflexible tenets of high modernism, born out of its quarrel with the façade architecture of historicism, was that a building should be designed from the inside out, its exterior the honest expression of its interior. Taniguchi has not done this, and his exquisite planes of sheer granite are just so much wrapping paper. The museum's strongest architectural element remains Cesar Pelli's fifty-four-story apartment tower on West Fifty-third Street. But there is no indication whatsoever that the museum's galleries sweep through the lower six stories of Pelli's tower, nor that its massive superstructure is carried effortlessly through the galleries without affecting their shape or character in the slightest.

If Taniguchi could not achieve formal unity on the exterior, he did so on the interior. His task was formidable: to expand the original complex from 378,000 to 630,000 square feet, of which the exhibition space increased from 85,000 to 120,000 square feet. But even as he drastically expanded the building, he also had to make it comprehensible, so that the visitor might stand within and grasp the logic of the whole. Taniguchi took MOMA's sculpture garden as his point of departure. To the east he placed the research and curatorial offices, and to the west his galleries, with the indispensable restaurant running parallel to it on the south. But he added two other formal elements: a broad lobby running continuously from West Fifty-third to West Fifty-fourth Street as a kind of internal street, and a lofty five-story central atrium, served by escalators, around which the galleries are grouped. These two spaces are the only ones that penetrate the entire building, one horizontally and one vertically, and they are the heart of the new MOMA.

Although the lobby and atrium are the principal routes of circulation, they do not flow freely into one another. Taniguchi has joined the two routes of circulation somewhat obliquely, so that the internal street, with its noise and bustle, is detached from the upward procession into the gallery. The visitor passing through the lobby is surprised when its low ceiling suddenly gives way to offer a startling view six stories up, into the space of the atrium, but to actually get there, one must first move away from the

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lobby and toward the sculpture garden, up two flights of stairs, and then double back into the atrium. This little jog functions as a sink trap, slowing the visitor for the more deliberate tempo above. This is perhaps why the stair is too narrow for the scale of the building, when it might have been graciously inviting.

On the second floor the ascending visitor encounters the largest galleries, nearly twenty-two feet high, devoted to contemporary art. Spilling out onto the atrium floor, they are capable of showing sculpture of considerable scale. There has been some grumbling that MOMA has tucked away its peerless collection of modern sculpture and painting on the fourth and fifth floors, while giving pride of place to contemporary art. But with the new vertical organization it makes sense to place what will surely be the noisiest galleries near the entrance, while somewhat cloistering the historical collections. In between come the galleries devoted to photography, architecture, and design, which are dispersed throughout the third floor, the most expansive of the gallery levels. In order to ensure that the path upwards is not simply a journey backward in time—and perhaps to ever more challenging art—the gallery for special exhibitions is placed at the top, on the sixth story.

Taniguchi has been roundly praised for the "invisible" character of his architecture, and indeed his interior is exceptionally insubstantial. There is no brandishing of architectural elements, of joints and beams, and no proud flaunting of the steel frame, as in Johnson's buildings. Instead, the interior is one of continuous white planes, weightless in expression. Where architectural details must be shown, as in the taut metal stairs that run up alongside of the atrium, they are kept as small and delicate as possible. Even the central row of columns that strides through the lobby, and that carry Pelli's skyscraper above, are entirely lacking in architectonic expression. The galleries devoted to painting and sculpture are laudably understated and do not attempt to compete with the art. They are, however, rather confusing in layout. In avoiding the monotony of the traditional corridor plan, they have fallen into the opposite error, producing an undifferentiated and directionless gallery of great expanse. Beyond a certain size, flowing continuous space only works if there are definite spatial reference points. And the color of the gallery walls is perhaps keyed too high, a shrill white that leaches the hues out of the paintings.

For all his audacity, Taniguchi has made a deeply conservative building, as critics have already noted. But MOMA's modernism has always been a rather fashionable and debonair affair, recalling that the Rockefeller family was the most important donor over the decades, and continues to play an influential role. One must admire the intelligence and confidence of the program, if one cannot entirely admire the result as a resolved work of art.

It is perhaps most disappointing in the atrium, where Taniguchi's detachment works against him. A strange, directionless space, inexplicably closed to the sky with only a sliver of a skylight, it has an oddly provisional character. Although it offers lovely, spatially dynamic vistas through cutouts on the wall, and although a Piranesian ramp hovers above, the space lacks the joyous freedom of Piranesi, even as it lacks the ordered resolution of a Kahn. It has something of the improvisatory awkwardness of a retrofit, where the ghosts of earlier functions and partitions carry into the new configuration. In the end, the new MOMA lacks the focused particularity, the sense of specific identity, that marks all great works of art. It has successfully inserted a working program into the shell of the old building, but that program has not been successfully shaped into an artistic whole. But at a time where the modern museum building threatens to overwhelm its contents with its own overweening importance, Taniguchi's reserved, deferential building is a success, a triumph of architectural patronage, if not of architecture.

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A conversation with Philip Pearlstein

by David Yezzi

Editor's note: Earlier this fall, David Yezzi, The New Criterion*'s poetry editor, interviewed the painter Philip Pearlstein at his apartment and studio in Manhattan's Garment District.*

DAVID YEZZI: Where do you find the objects that you include in your paintings?
PHILIP PEARLSTEIN: Everywhere. This bench that you're sitting on is a primitive American, made by somebody probably in the 1930s, and obviously it took some skill, but it's all truly folk art. And it's documented. It may actually be much earlier. It's just a slab of wood resting on two cross pieces, but the back and sides are made up of these crudely turned rods. Some dealer had it for sale, and I bought it to use in a painting.

DY: Do you collect objects for their own sake, or is it always with painting in mind?
PP: Originally, everything was collected for its own sake, but I lived in a brownstone and this area where we're sitting with these multicolored squares of linoleum was my entire working space for twenty-two years. Brownstones are small—fifteen feet wide and thirty-five feet long. Half the space was working, and half was storage. So I had all this stuff, folk art, that I kept buying, and classical antiquities. Most of it was just piled into the back part of the top story of the brownstone—the front half. It never occurred to me to use them in paintings.

But then when I moved here, there were six or seven graduate students from my courses at Brooklyn College; I hired them to help me make the move, just the studio, to consolidate and load up the van. And we were supposed to be here at seven o'clock in the evening, or five o'clock in the afternoon, and it was midnight by the time we got here. Everybody was tired. The brownstone was four stories high, and they had to walk up and down all day long. And they just piled the stuff in groups, you know, furniture, sculpture, weathervanes on stands, all that kind of stuff. That airplane above us was smashed up in the moving van, and that's been pieced together somewhat.

DY: And that's appeared in your paintings.
PP: I've used it a number of times. And the stuff looked so interesting in these accidental groupings that they became part of my subject. . . . I have to admit I did an M.A. thesis.

DY: On Picabia, wasn't it?
PP: Picabia and Duchamp. I couldn't separate the two. I concentrated on 1910 to 1921, you know, the Dada period. And it was very interesting. I was painting abstractly at the time. And the things about Duchamp that I read, there was very little in English at the time, and I had to read it all in French. I spent about eighteen months just translating articles, and it was a wonderful experience. And then when I moved the studio, the idea of "accident," I mean, here

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it was, right here in my own space, these accidental groupings of these crazy objects that really didn't belong together. And I just had the models pose in between them. New York City is the great flea market. And you walk around doing what Duchamp did. You look at all these odd objects. I used to go to the flea market very often, and you designate these things as art. You confer on them a kind of status that maybe the maker never thought of.

DY: How many work spaces do you have going at one time?
PP: Almost every working session is on a different painting. Right now, there's a watercolor, an oil painting in the middle here, and two oil paintings down there. And one night a week I work on portraits, just of friends.

DY: What is the difference for you between the portraits and the paintings with models?
PP: None. No difference. Except the paintings of models with these objects look like they mean something. And again that was very much influenced by my paper on Duchamp and Picabia. You know, I spent three years writing it. It wasn't a casual thing. And at the end of it I figured, if it took me that long to figure out their work, what the hidden symbolism was, why bother? Here I was getting a master's degree doing it, but who's going to get a master's degree looking at my paintings of models? I decided that they don't mean anything. The objects look like they are heavy symbols, but they're not. They're just themselves. So it's all portraiture, really.

DY: Are there any instructions that you give to your models?
PP: No. They help me set up the image, and they take their positions. They make themselves as comfortable as possible, because it's going to be a long time. Then they fall asleep (*laughs*). If they keep their eyes open, it's hard work for them. We mark the positions with pieces of tape, so that the position can always be taken again. And I keep the daylight out. I've only done a few in daylight.

DY: How is daylight different?
PP: Daylight keeps changing. Even the little bit of daylight that seeps through the covered windows makes a difference. A sunny day is totally different than a gray day, even with the drapes closed. So with the artificial light, I can work any time, because I'm a slave to the models' schedules. We have to work under every condition.

Most of the models that I've worked with are artists themselves, men *and* women. It's easier to work for someone like me than to drive a cab for a few hours. But since the cab pays more (*laughs*), male models don't hang around as long. But there has been an interesting series of people. Several of the models I've used over the years come from other countries. Chile. One is from Chile by way of Mexico—and New England, also—who grew up in this crazy cultural mix. So one person represents several cultures. One woman was from Santiago, but she'd spent a lot of time in Paris, and now she was in New York, looking very American and talking very American. Another girl grew up in Israel. Another one, a current model, is a journalist from South America in graduate school.

One woman I worked with for about fifteen years and another one at least twelve years. They have their own careers as artists going, but they still need the money. It's very expensive to be an artist in New York City. More recently, some of the models have been dancers who also work in gymnasiums, doing exercise classes. A couple have been theater people. They keep me informed as to what's going on in the arts.

And by and large most of them have been much smarter than me, much better educated. The fellow who was posing for me the last three or four years put himself into pre-med and was getting all A's in his courses. He finally stopped modeling, because he just got too busy with school work. He's going to be a male nurse. He's extremely intelligent.

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DY: How many sessions do your pictures usually take?
PP: It depends on the complexity of the painting. I use fabrics for the design component. In a portrait, it's what stripes are in the shirt or the dress. Neckties can take more time than the face.

DY: Your compositions have been getting more complex over the years. I'm thinking of the inclusion of mirrors and other elements that complicate the compositions in wonderful ways.
PP: I always try to make sure that there are enough details, like electrical outlets and so forth, to keep it from becoming a surrealist vision. Not that I don't like surrealism, but I'm not a surrealist. These are simply models, set up in the studio. Along with deciding that they didn't mean anything, I decided that it's better not to try to get involved in any psychological interpretation or literary symbolism.

DY: Is the term "realist" useful to you?
PP: Well, that's the term I use, but probably naturalism would be closer. Realism in the nineteenth century had political overtones—paintings that were commentaries on social conditions. One of the things that I've been told over the years is that realist painters are dumb. And there was a critic that I always respected until he wrote that "realists, like the poor, will always be with us." I think that's an attitude that's very much around. It's assumed that the realist artist is a dumb, inarticulate person, who can't do anything else. He can't think his way to conceptual art or to abstraction. It's "easier" to paint something that's right in front of you.

I've often tried to make the point that I got involved with realism rather late in life. I mean, when I was in high school, realism was everything. That's what American art was about. Then after World War II, when I came back on the GI Bill and went to college, to Carnegie, everybody, including me, was trying to be modern. So for the next twenty years I made an attempt to be a modernist.

I worked a lot in graphic design, at a fairly low level, but for very good people. And I studied art history during that period, got the degree at New York University's Institute of Fine Arts, where I did the thesis on Picabia and Duchamp. And all the time I was painting abstract expressionist paintings based on landscape—I wasn't a true abstractionist.

Those abstract expressionist paintings I did were based on watercolors and drawings that I made from a collection of rocks that I had collected out on Montauk Point or someplace. I still have them sitting around (*laughs*). Only the rocks got more and more interesting, and I ended up trying to be true to the rocks. Then, when I got a Fulbright to Italy, where I had been in the Army, I spent most of that winter drawing Roman ruins and trying to make paintings from the drawings. The paintings started out very abstract expressionist and then gradually, during that winter, they got truer and truer to the look of the ruins. I began paying attention to the way light fell, and color change, and all that. Before I knew it, I was making these very realistic drawings, as accurate and as true to the subject as I could.

But what I learned in this whole thing of abstract expressionism and studying modernism is a lot about picture structure. So I began using nature to fit my ideas of picture structure without compromising nature.

DY: Were you more influenced by painters that we would identify with the realist tradition or by painters generally identified with abstraction?
PP: With abstraction. Even now when I go to a museum I don't look at the nineteenth-century realist painters, or even the eighteenth-century painters. I really love the art that goes way back, Byzantine and ancient Roman. And I think I've probably spent the most time looking at Greek vase paintings.

DY: What about them interests you?
PP: Well, they have a wonderful sense of design. What I got out of the years of work-

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ing on graphic design was that we were always working with shapes. I worked on catalogues for American Standard Sanitary (*laughs*). And it was all about shapes. And that's how I got to Duchamp and Picabia. Of course, their Dada works were all about mechanical shapes. And I loved shapes—the clear outlines. I was thoroughly brainwashed by that. And that's what I love about Egyptian art. It looks like graphic design (*laughs*). There's a mathematical logic.

There's a lot of graphic design, at least the people I worked with, that had to do with measuring. You're always walking around with this measurement in your head, either picas or inches. And you start dividing things into thirds, or quarters, or whatever it is. So I walk around measuring things. That's how I draw. I don't draw in any traditional way. I just measure. I look for the shapes, and then I measure from side to side, by eye, one contour to another, and just build it up like building blocks, or a puzzle, almost. And it has to work out. If it doesn't work out, I have to erase it and start over again. I develop the whole composition that way.

DY: What is your relationship to the emotional content of the work, which seems to me to be strongly present?
PP: I know. You can't get rid of it. I've done my best (*laughs*). Somehow paintings seem to take on their own content. Paintings seem to imply something, whether you want them to or not. It's been very interesting to try to get rid of it, because it's impossible. Paintings take on lives of their own. I guess any artwork does.

DY: And is it something about the human figure and the objects themselves that retains this charge?
PP: Right. A lot of my attitude came out of writing an article for Tom Hess at *Art News*. He had me write about shows, if I was interested in them. I must have written maybe ten or fifteen. But one of the shows he thought I'd find interesting was a Museum of Modern Art show that came after the "New Images of Man" show, about three years later. They held an open competition; anybody could enter a painting about people—you know, figures. I can't remember what the name of the show was, but they had to do with the human figure. So I went to the storeroom, and on one side of the room there's the accepted work, and on the other side is the rejected work. Well, the rejected work had everything that to me looked like it was approaching realism. And what was accepted was all this expressionist or "New Images of Man," all this highly expressionistic work.[1]

So I began writing about the question: why was one style acceptable and not the other, to a sophisticated audience? Or why was it so difficult for someone who wanted to do realist painting to make it interesting enough to be acceptable to this sophisticated audience? That's what the article became. By the end of the article, I was a confirmed realist. I talked myself into the problems. I tried to define what the problems were, and I blamed a lot of it on Cézanne (*laughs*). And the implication of Cézanne's patchy work and the dissolving of the figure.

This gets back to the point I was trying to make earlier about people assuming that realist artists are dumb bunnies. I talked myself into it. I could have been any kind of painter. I mean, I think I had enough intelligence and ability to paint in any style ever invented and do a pretty good job of it. But I deliberately chose to work with the figure partly because of that article, because I felt it was an area that was totally neglected. Nobody else was interested. It had been pushed aside. Realism in America had simply become commercial illustration, and I thought there were other possibilities I could come up with or discover. And I try to make the work competitive with abstraction. It has to hold its place, you know,

1 "New Images of Man," shown at the Museum of Modern Art in 1959, was a survey of contemporary representation of the human form in painting and sculpture. It included works by Jackson Pollack, Alberto Giacometti, Willem de Kooning, Francis Bacon, Karel Appel, Leon Golub, and many others.

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when seen in the context of other contemporary, mostly abstract, artwork.

DY: Are there things in the contemporary scene that interest you?
PP: Well, yes. I see as much as I can. I like jurying shows, only because it gives you a chance to see what a lot of people are doing. And over the years, I've done a number of visiting artists programs, going to visit graduate schools. That's where you see the interesting stuff, the really inventive work. There's a friend of mine who's done this sort of thing. You go to a studio, and you do your best to give everybody an intelligent critique of their work depending on what they're doing. But off in the corner there's somebody doing something very strange, who doesn't want to hear what you have to say about it. They're the ones who more or less take over. They're the ones who become what you see in the galleries, to a great extent, a few years later.

DY: Why is that?
PP: It's a mystery (*laughs*). I love seeing somebody come up with something that I never would have dreamed of. I find that exciting. But I have to say that, on my last visit down to Chelsea, there were several galleries that had projections, video and so on. A lot of it looks pretty stupid. The camera and the equipment they have set up is far more interesting than the images they project—even the most elaborate of them.

DY: Maybe the perception that realist painters are dumb would better apply to conceptual artists?
PP: Or at least to the video people. I really worry about them (*laughs*). I mean there are so many interesting things to look at in the world, and they seem to pick the dumbest. Well, but maybe that's what I'm doing with the models. You know, it's an art school convention that I'm using.

DY: But what about that convention has continued to engage you?
PP: I can't solve it. I've never felt that I've really been able to master the problem of trying to paint what I see in front of me. You know, I rejected working from photographs, too. It's much more exciting to try to pin down this form that keeps moving. No matter how much somebody tries not to, they keep changing.

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Reflections on taste

by Marco Grassi

Not long ago, I enjoyed a spirited conversation with a highly perceptive and well-informed observer of our contemporary cultural landscape—a conversation mostly concerned with the quality of art criticism as practiced today in the principal forums of informed opinion: university lecture halls and scholarly journals. My friend and I readily agreed that the cultural terrain we surveyed was disappointing, to say the least: a barren and monochrome landscape. We thus echoed a familiar lament, repeated often over the years, he, in far more articulate terms than I.

As I later reconsidered some of the points we discussed, it occurred to me that a contributing factor to the ills that we were so strenuously deploring was the absence, in contemporary criticism, of one important ingredient. Simply put, it seemed that the role of taste—yes, *taste*—had so dramatically diminished in the dialogue on art that it had virtually disappeared. Taste no longer an ingredient of art criticism? . . . Impossible. Surely my memory was again playing tricks on me. How could taste *not* be accounted for in any serious discourse dealing with artistic expression? And yet, try as I might, only irrelevant recent references came to mind: the oddly titled exhibition *A Taste of Angels*, Gerald Reitlinger's rather too venal *Economics of Taste*, and the impossibly snobbish display of *Princely Taste*. No doubt about it; taste was no longer common currency in today's cultural bazaar. Undeterred, I continued my search.

It was like trying to locate an old and trusted friend and suddenly realizing he had dropped from sight: no address, no telephone listing, not even a mention in the school alumni register. Since I had always regarded taste as an indispensable companion in my encounters with art, this disappearance represented a substantial loss. Relying on taste as a companion made these encounters—superficial as they may have been—certainly more enjoyable and, to some extent, a great deal easier. Did something on a gallery wall not agree with me? . . . I could blame my trusty guide—taste—or a momentary desertion thereof. Just like a powerful serum, taste provided immunity against the unwelcome onslaughts of the ever more aggressive viruses circulating in the contemporary art world. Taste was also a vanity that allowed me to feel superior, yet, at the same time, provided a shield behind which to hide my considerable ignorance. Its absence, now, posed a real problem for anyone like me, whose early art-awareness had been nurtured in the mid-twentieth century by a combination of family tradition and academic training.

How, then, can taste be defined in this context? In its simplest terms, I would compare it to an indicating arrow. The magnetic fields to which this arrow responds are constituted by accretions of heredity, experience, tutoring and, occasionally, enlightened awareness. Taste, therefore, possesses no true-north, as in a

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compass, but it most emphatically does have direction—better yet, *directions*. And these directions are the vectors of our aesthetic inclinations; they condition our preferences and responses. Without this essential GPS, significant dialogue in matters of art cannot continue. Or so I thought. Yet there was no denying that, yes indeed, taste *was* no longer an issue. Definitely gone. Perhaps forgotten? Replaced? No, much worse . . . irreparably unfashionable . . . its passing unmourned.

The reasons for this demise are not difficult to enumerate. Principal among them are the connotations associated with the word itself. Taste, after all, implies that the preferences and responses prompted by one person's aesthetic inclinations may well be different from another's. The directional arrows of which I spoke may, indeed, legitimately point to opposite poles, and yet these poles may be perfectly equidistant and equivalent. That's fine; different tastes, same values. But, then again, they might not. If so, could not one direction be *truer* than another? Might not, finally, one person's taste be *better* than another's? Ouch, that's *not* so fine! And therein lies, as they say, the rub . . . therein is explained the opprobrium to which the word "taste" and all it signifies has fallen victim. "So-and-so has no taste"; "this-or-that is superbly tasteful"; "a tasteless performance" . . . it all simply reeks of elitism. Now we all know that elitism, of late, has become an unconscionable and unpardonable capital offense in the realm of ideas . . . thus one verdict alone is called for: guilty; and off with its head! Taste is taboo; *streng verboten*.

The recent conversation to which I alluded earlier, however, demonstrates that, fortunately, a few minds are still open. Dialogue on the subject of taste, although carried on in a quasi-clandestine manner, survives. And so, in an attempt to develop further thoughts on this subversive issue, I came, quite unprepared, upon the figure of Roger Fry. It was a name, alas, only dimly recalled.

Several were the reasons that Fry occupied such a decidedly marginal position in my scheme of things. As an English art-historian and critic, he had, as I saw it, been brilliantly overtaken by his successors Kenneth Clark and John Pope-Hennessy. In my chosen field, Renaissance art, his only contribution (on Giovanni Bellini) was a youthful, not particularly insightful, and short-lived "berensonian" exegesis. Bloomsbury, of which Fry was a charter and card-carrying member, had never evoked its special magic for me. Finally, I was simply not drawn to the unworldly, Quaker-ish, artsy-crafty image that my memory somehow conjured up. Pope-Hennessy, of his only meeting with Fry, recalled: "His appearance was unattractive—he had coarse, roughly parted hair and dirty fingernails." Nonetheless, what I *did* perceive, however sketchily, was that Fry represented, in art and criticism, a radically and diametrically different position than that currently regarded as the norm in these disciplines today.

With this modest historical baggage, I began an exploratory excursion that was to reveal just how profoundly Fry and his counterparts of today are separated, spiritually as well as temporally. In the matter at hand, taste, they simply occupy different planets. The exploration was not facilitated by an abundance of material; if anything, this scarcity underlined the critical limbo into which Fry has descended. Frances Spalding's admirably researched and balanced biography on Fry, from 1980, is the lone account of his life that divides the intimate portrait that (none other than) Virginia Woolf published forty years earlier and the present. Not surprisingly, the two *lumi* of this journal have, more recently, contributed brief but perceptive essays on aspects of Fry's legacy (see Hilton Kramer's afterword to Fry's *Giovanni Bellini* and Roger Kimball's essay on Fry in *Art's Prospect*).

The defining moment, of course, in the creation of that legacy came in 1910. On November 10 of that year, the Grafton Gallery in London inaugurated the exhibit of

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contemporary French art that Roger Fry had organized. This extraordinary enterprise, occuring so close to Guy Fawkes Day, was seen by an outraged public as the artistic equivalent of blowing up Parliament. In the amusing and informative chapter devoted to this epochal event in Ian Dunlop's book *The Shock of the New*, by far the most revealing anecdotes are those pertaining to the reactions of the local art establishment and some of its most eminent exponents. The participating artists, dubbed by Fry himself "Post-Impressionists," constituted a nearly complete roster of the great innovators, from Cézanne to Picasso. Bringing them together for the first time outside of France was a remarkable undertaking, and it spoke eloquently of Fry's thorough familiarity with the Parisian art scene and his deep commitment to the new artistic concepts evolving there.

Much has been written about the significance of the 1910 Post-Impressionist exhibit and a sequel organized, again by Fry, two years later. Unquestionably, these events were to have very profound consequences for the subsequent development of British culture and as milestones in the story of twentieth-century art. For us, however, they epitomize those qualities that warrant a reappraisal of Fry in the light of our world today, almost one hundred years on.

Fry had shown an early promise in the natural sciences. These studies suited his ability to analyze all manner of botanical and zoological specimens, skillfully drawing them and, in the process, comparing their structures and the functional aspects of their inner architecture. He brought these talents to his next pursuit—painting—on which he embarked soon after departing Cambridge. It was a passion that would not abandon him and to which he devoted enormous energies throughout his life. Visits to Italy and an early interest in Renaissance art contributed the final ingredients to the "magnetic field" that, thereafter, conditioned Roger Fry's aesthetic compass. It is not my purpose here to enumerate and describe the theories that he developed, defined, and continually redefined throughout his, one might say, hyperactive career. It's sufficient to understand, in this context, that Fry committed his entire intellectual stock to these theories and applied them in a dizzying variety of permutations. It was his absolute conviction in the validity of these views that led Fry to champion art forms that were, to say the least, out of the mainstream, or to reassess familiar *genres* in startling new ways.

Every recollection of Fry, the man, every anecdote and episode of his life, have bequeathed to us the image of an impassioned, remarkably articulate, and vastly cultured commentator whose famously resonant voice and appropriately disheveled appearance imposed itself commandingly and unforgettably, not only in the public arena of the university lecture room, but also in the more private confines of his circle of friends and domestic environment. Is it any wonder, then, that it should fall to Roger Fry to fire the artistic salvo represented by the 1910 Post-Impressionist exhibition? And since it is to his aesthetic judgment that this undertaking was due, was this not a supreme and supremely significant exercise of taste? Was this not, in what today would be considered an unacceptable display of elitist arrogance, a way of saying: "Trust me, I know better"? Kenneth Clark understood this and paid his friend and mentor the ultimate compliment: "In so far as taste can be changed by one man, it was changed by Roger Fry."

Fry, who died in 1934, lived to see a Cézanne enshrined in London's National Gallery. This, of course, was not the only instance in which events were to prove him right; his memorable lectures at Cambridge were instrumental in the elevation of art-history studies to the prestige of other academic disciplines. Artistic expressions from non-European cultures found in Fry a pioneering advocate who was ever insatiably curious to explore, compare, evaluate. He was at his best as a proselytizer. As Kenneth Clark has pointed out, his writ-

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ings, provocative as they are, never projected the force and conviction with which he enunciated those same ideas in his lectures. Even with an audience of one, before an art object, Fry would invent, tease, cajole, and, finally, mesmerize his listener into total submission. In this sense, one can count Roger Fry as the first great popular commentator on art. His language was plain without being common, elegant without being precious, and scholarly without being pedantic . . . often displaying surprising flashes of wit. Commenting on the theft of two important paintings in a 1907 *Burlington* notice, he wrote:

> The theft of masterpieces of painting is fortunately as rare as it is foolish. Every painting is unique and its identity is easier to establish than that of a living person . . . [this] theft must therefore be regarded as one of those unfortunate lapses from common-sense which are likely to become rarer with the spread of education among the criminal classes.

Unfortunately this prediction proved as inaccurate as it was amusing.

Many other insights and predictions in which Fry invested generously and enthusiastically cannot, today, be defended, particularly on the terrain which concerns us: the exercise of taste. What to say of his whole-hearted plunge into the Omega Workshops enterprise? It came as a result of Fry's embrace of the Post-Impressionists and was an attempt to transfuse the principles of new, twentieth-century art-forms into designs for furniture, utensils, fabrics, and interior decoration. Like much of what Fry undertook, it was an innovative and bold departure, but, unlike the Bauhaus that came later, its subsequent impact was negligible. The Omega Workshops only managed to produce a great quantity of hokey, often grotesque, and poorly crafted goods. The initiative soon failed . . . taste and talent gone astray. The same may be said for other, more intellectual, pursuits to which Fry devoted considerable analytical energy. One of these rather puzzling turns occurred when his "compass," guided as it was by his thoughtful and insightful principles, pointed to Greek art as a target for serious, but negative, criticism. In England, where the classical tradition was considered untouchable, Fry's quibbling with some exalted fifth-century examples such as the marbles of Olympia and positive rejection of virtually all Archaic sculpture was startling indeed. These judgments, needless to say, cannot be revisited today without serious misgivings.

Some of Fry's other verdicts, concerning previously unexplored areas such as the Baroque, also sank as quickly as they had surfaced. Sample a statement such as "It must not be thought that the Baroque in giving up tactile experience and confining itself to [the] visual, lost thereby the sense of plastic relief; by a strange paradox it actually heightened the pictorial expression of mass and volume." He goes on, for the remainder of an interminable paragraph, explaining this "strange paradox," succeeding only in muddying the waters still further.

And yet, on the very next page, a flash of genius: "I think we may give to Caravaggio the honour of having been the first purely popular artist, the real founder of the Royal Academy, the Salon and almost the whole art of the cinema."

What a dizzying tightrope the critic was willing to risk!—ever ready to retreat, revise, and regroup if he felt he had missed the mark by too wide a margin. For Roger Fry, although elected to the post of Slade Professor at Cambridge, was, to his great credit, a most *un*-professorial professor. He prefaced one of his lectures there with the remark: "I confess I have the habit, perhaps rather reprehensible in a Professor, of lecturing about subjects of which I know very little in the hope of gaining some clearer notion of them. I dare say we shall . . . at least have looked inquisitively at a number of works of art . . . and with luck arrive at some suggestions of correlated ideas." Think of it . . . would any academic in the field of

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art history today use the word *luck* to describe an intellectual process?

Whatever the detours and uncertainties, Fry stuck steadfastly by his core edifice of assumptions and deductions and it survived essentially intact: art exists in a realm detached from the practical, the particular, and the descriptive; its existence and communicative potential have to do with factors and ingredients that are unchanging: line, volume, rhythm, color, and movement. These are the pure elemental building blocks common to every pictorial or sculptural expression, from the Egyptian to the European, from the African to the Asian. They constitute the language of art and are ends unto themselves. This, in essence, was Fry's ideological edifice. In time, it succeeded in definitively dismantling the Victorian edifice that had preceded it, the one so magisterially crafted by John Ruskin. In his postscript to *Bellini*, Hilton Kramer commented that:

> In common with other Victorian sages . . . Ruskin took all of culture and society as his spiritual and intellectual province. What this meant in this case, was that the experience of art was closely bound to a range of interests—nature, religion, politics, and the conduct of life—that made artistic judgments in one degree or another hostage to a variety of extra-artistic imperatives.

If not necessarily an *anti*-Victorian, in the Bloomsbury sense, Fry was assuredly a *post*-Victorian. For Fry there was only the art object and his response to it, dictated by taste alone. He, himself, put this succinctly: "Morality appreciates emotion by the standard of resultant action. Art appreciates emotion in and for itself."

Now let's re-read Kramer's comment on Victorian art criticism, just above, with the addition of a few words (in italics) and a change of tense for good measure: "the experience of art is closely bound to a range of interests—nature, religion, politics, the conduct of life, *gender, economics, and race*—that make artistic judgments in one degree or another hostage to a variety of extra-artistic imperatives." Bingo! A perfect account of art criticism as practiced, not by that arch-Victorian Ruskin, but by your standard-issue, contemporary, art-department academic. No need to rub one's eyes, we *did* read it correctly; artistic judgments were, indeed, in Ruskin's time, hostage to a variety of extra-artistic imperatives, but they are ever so much more so today.

My re-acquaintance with Roger Fry suggested that the excursion, at first reluctantly undertaken, was entirely justified. The sheer pleasure of his prose was the first reward, but then there was the refreshing sensation of a hugely generous mentor regaling one with a veritable torrent of provocative judgments, insights, and comparisons, never for a moment disappearing behind the ready-made formula or pre-digested opinion. Fry comes at us, chest bared and fearless, armed only with his utterly sure sense of discernment—his taste—and it shocks us, not having experienced anything approaching that boldness in contemporary criticism for decades. This realization has made me wonder if we have not, with our postmodern cant, become, quite without realizing it, neo-Victorians . . . pious born-again Ruskins.

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Recollections: Greenberg & Frankenthaler

by André Emmerich

Editor's note: The distinguished art dealer André Emmerich was an urbane and civilizing force in the New York art world from 1954, when he opened his first gallery in his apartment, until 1998, when he retired from his gallery on Fifty-seventh Street. Among the many important artists he represented were William Bailey, Anthony Caro, Helen Frankenthaler, David Hockney, Morris Louis, and Ben Nicholson. The following vignettes about the critic Clement Greenberg and the color-field painter Helen Frankenthaler are taken from My Life with Art, *Mr. Emmerich's nearly completed memoir.*

Much paper has been consumed by writing that falls into the category of art criticism. In my experience, the only critic who exerted an influence on artists was Clement Greenberg. He developed close relationships with painters and sculptors whose work he admired and championed in his writings and conversations. In turn, many of these artists highly valued his exceptional eye and his critique of their work. Many artists asked Greenberg to help them install their gallery shows.

For some, Greenberg became a one-man audience whose reaction to their new work was crucial to them. In the 1960s, word of mouth that an artist was well-regarded by Clement Greenberg often translated into commercial success. The world remembered that Greenberg had spotted Jackson Pollock early on as the great new master when he was still little understood, widely ignored, even ridiculed. Collectors, eager not to miss the next wave and to acquire work by a still unrecognized master before it became expensive, looked to him as an oracle, the Warren Buffett of the art world.

I had come to know Greenberg early in the 1950s when the world of contemporary art was still so small that everyone seemed to know everyone. Later on, my gallery came to represent artists whose work interested him, among them the painters Helen Frankenthaler, Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski, and Friedel Dzubas, and the sculptors Anthony Caro, Michael Steiner, and Anne Truitt. At the same time, the gallery also represented noted artists whose work did not have Greenberg's particular support, such as David Hockney, Sam Francis, Al Held, Beverly Pepper, and Pierre Alechinsky. Notwithstanding the gallery's broad spectrum, which reflected my own taste and interests, there were jealous tongues that claimed to know that, based on no evidence at all, I had financially subsidized Greenberg. From what I know of Greenberg, it would have been totally out of character for him to accept compensation from any dealer, although he did not disdain gifts of art from artists. As for me, I never gave him anything of value beyond including his name on the list of friends to whom I sent some decent red wine at Christmas.

In the wake of Morris Louis's death in

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September 1962, I began to work with Clement Greenberg in his role as art advisor to the Louis estate. Louis had left close to five hundred large paintings, all carefully rolled and stored in the basement of his and wife's small house in Washington, D.C. As dealer for the estate, I was present when the paintings were unrolled and catalogued. Later on, after the canvases had been shipped to a New York warehouse, they needed to be looked at again periodically to select works for my gallery as well as galleries in other cities and abroad, and for museum exhibitions. Greenberg was present at these occasions and his critical comments were always carefully noted for future reference. It was fascinating to observe his perceptive, insightful eye at work.

Like many New York intellectuals of the time, Greenberg lived comfortably but modestly in a rent-controlled apartment on the then unfashionable Upper West Side. Greenberg liked to receive, much as in a nineteenth-century salon, the steady stream of visitors from all over the country and the globe, including artists, collectors, dealers, writers, and acolytes that clustered around him at the frequent cocktail hour gatherings at his apartment. It was from here that his ideas were first discussed and debated, and—during the later years of his life—from where they spread across the United States, Canada, England, and the Continent. These events included devoted old friends along with new pilgrims eager to meet the master. The visitors to this modern salon were treated to an aspect of Greenberg that could not come across in his writings, his exceptional charm.

But for all his brilliance, there was an aspect of Greenberg's personality that also drove away friends and followers, as well as some artists who owed much of their success to his embrace of their work. I made a deliberate effort to remain on good personal terms with him. At the same time, I kept a certain distance to avoid the possibility of a bitter break, as I witnessed happening to so many others. Greenberg's ideas as well as his acid tongue provoked a great deal of hostility, some of which was deflected onto the artists who were seen as his protégés and followers. In the late 1950s and the 1960s, his positive words about an artist's work translated rapidly into sales, but in the 1970s and 1980s his attention could easily turn into a handicap. The term "formalism" had become a pejorative and Greenberg's ideas were derided. Things had reached such a point that, after his death, when his friends wanted to organize a memorial service, no New York museum claimed to be able to make available a suitable locale for what had been the leading art critic of his generation. In the end, I arranged for appropriate space at the Century Association.

It is only now that a new generation, which never knew the man, but only his writing, is rediscovering his books and essays, and reading them with appreciation. I don't think it is a coincidence that, at the same time, there is a revival of interest in Color Field painting. I always suspected that Greenberg would find his proper place in the front rank of American art critics only after the generation which included the many he had alienated had largely left the stage.

In retrospect, it is remarkable how Greenberg achieved his status as the most influential and most discussed art critic of his time without a position of power and influence. He did not hold a professorship at any university or a curatorship at any museum. In 1939 his landmark essay "Avant Garde and Kitsch" was published, and it lifted him from obscurity. From 1939 until 1942 he was an editor at *Partisan Review* and art critic for *The Nation* from 1942 to 1949. From 1959 to 1960 he served as consultant to the short-lived contemporary New York gallery, French & Co. He had no other formal affiliations. His fame was uniquely due to the force and persuasiveness of his ideas and his writing.

* * *

The early 1960s were the period of serial painting. There seemed to be a need for art-

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ists to develop and explore a dominant signature image. One artist who chose not to follow this supposed critical requirement was Helen Frankenthaler. At the time, this was held against her, the prevailing opinion being that work that did not stick to serial imagery was inconsistent. An iconic image was presumably necessary. At the same time, collectors of her work requested that Frankenthaler sign paintings on the front of the pictures rather than on the back, so that her work would be more readily identifiable by the collectors and their friends. With the perspective of decades, it has of course become clear that Frankenthaler's paintings do not need either an iconic image or a visible signature in order to allow us to identify her works as hers, suffused as they are by her combination of style, techniques, and stained colors.

Helen has been courageous in the making of her art. For many years, when she was still little known, she insisted on painting on large-scale canvases even though there was little chance of selling them in a world which was not yet willing to commit important wall spaces to her art. She was certainly aware that small- and medium-scale pictures sold much more easily. Nonetheless, the bulk of her work, and certainly the paintings shown in her annual solo exhibitions, were sizable canvases. She recognized that her best work was on a scale that seemed large in the 1960s; seen with today's eyes, they no longer loom so large.

In 1963 Helen and her husband, Robert Motherwell, spent the summer in Provincetown. For her studio, Helen rented a fisherman's loft, originally constructed for the drying and repairing of sails and nets. As usual, she painted most of her work on the floor. At the end of the summer, reviewing her work prior to stretching it, Helen decided that the too-brilliant hues she had employed did not really satisfy her. Instead, she decided that the soaked-through reverse of each canvas was in fact what she preferred. That, with some additions, is how she created the muted, lyrical images that were exhibited the following season. In some passages, one can still see the pattern made by the floor boards of the loft.

Frankenthaler was one of a number of women artists I represented during the life of the gallery. I showed their work notwithstanding the bias that perceived women artists by definition as minor. Interestingly, this prejudice remained particularly strong in Europe. For many years I struggled in vain to interest European dealers, curators, and critics in Frankenthaler's work. The tide did not really begin to change until the 1990s.

The list of woman artists I represented is a long one and included, among others, Nancy Graves, Guitou Knoop, Pat Lipsky, Beverly Pepper, Judy Pfaff, Germaine Richier, Dorothea Rockburne, Anne Ryan, Miriam Schapiro, Sylvia Stone, and Anne Truitt. Of these artists, the one who had by far the most exhibitions in my gallery was Helen Frankenthaler. Today she is seen as a major painter, a fountainhead of Color Field painting. The literature on her work is extensive, fills volumes large and small, and is constantly being added to. In the once-feared auctions at Sotheby's and Christie's, records continue to be achieved by her work. Many museums own her paintings and display them prominently—in contrast to earlier years when her work was often kept in the museums' storage. It was only slowly, show by annual show, that her work began to be appreciated for its lyricism and strength. It took years for it to overcome the all-too-frequent categorization as "feminine" or "decorative." For all the breakthrough influence Frankenthaler's celebrated 1952 painting *Mountains and Sea* had on Noland and Louis, with its pioneering technique of staining, she continued to be regarded as a woman painter and therefore not quite in the same league as the male heavy hitters of her generation.

An important milestone for Frankenthaler was her retrospective at the Whitney Museum in 1969. The totality of her achievement could for the first time be seen under one roof. The exhibition was a

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revelation to many. Seeing two decades of work as a moving and impressive whole, I myself gained a new insight on Helen's stature. The retrospective traveled to the Whitechapel Gallery in London, at that time the leading venue for vanguard art in Britain. Afterwards, the show continued to Germany, where it was shown in Hannover and West Berlin. Eugene Goossen, who had curated the exhibition, and I joined Frankenthaler on a memorable trip to attend this opening of the show. It was the height of the Cold War, and the obligatory passage through Checkpoint Charlie to visit East Berlin's great museums was a truly chilling experience. Because Frankenthaler, Goossen, and I were considered V.I.P.s, the State Department arranged for us to visit East Berlin in one of their long Cadillac limousines, complete with a junior U.S. official as our guide and a small Stars and Stripes on the fender. Once we arrived at Checkpoint Charlie, our guide and limousine could drive right through the still new Berlin Wall.

The East Germans considered us ordinary tourists, so we had to pass on foot through what looked like the setting of a B-grade spy movie. The guards wore uniforms highly reminiscent of those of the SS, with a Kalashnikov slung over the shoulder. They never spoke in an ordinary conversational tone of voice, but barked and bellowed orders. Our passports were studied as if they were forgeries. The sense of unease was acute, perhaps most of all for me, as I speak German and understood all too well what their tone and behavior implied about their brutality, barely restrained. We were happy to pick up our State Department limousine and guide after the checkpoint, to proceed to the glories of the East Berlin museums, and then to head to the previously assigned restaurant. It was clearly one of a restricted few where visitors were allowed to eat. A junior maître d' seated us at a table surrounded by others in the middle of the floor. We were hardly seated when a senior maître d' rushed over, shouted at his junior, and took us over to another table situated next to a plywood wall. Each of the three of us had the distinct feeling that that was a location featuring pre-installed microphones, the better to overhear the conversation of dangerous foreigners. Our sense of liberation after returning safely to West Berlin was like waking from a nightmare.

In the years that followed, there were many more trips across the map to Helen Frankenthaler exhibition openings. While she may have been a slow starter in the public eye, she has more than caught up. Her work has been celebrated with more museum exhibitions than any other American artist represented by my gallery, more books and articles, and an avalanche of honorary doctorates. With it all, Helen has also managed to have more fun than most other artists do. A great party-giver, she helped me celebrate innumerable birthdays in her studio. There was always music to match, mostly Sinatra, to which she danced for hours with great style and enthusiasm.

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Pictures from an institution

by James Panero

[T]he absurdities of Benton were so absurd, and I myself was so thoroughly used to them, that they had come to seem to me, almost, the ordinary absurdities of existence. Like Gertrude, I cherished my grievances against God, but to some of them I had become very accustomed. . . .

Sex, greed, envy, power, money: Gertrude knew that these were working away at Benton . . . exactly as they work away everywhere else.
—Randall Jarrell, *Pictures from an Institution*

As far as I know, the great novel of graduate-student life has yet to be written. As for the life of the graduate student of art history, a subgenre of subgenres, one finds virgin literary terrain. Kingsley Amis gave us Dixon and Welch, and you could do worse for a model than that. *Lucky Jim*'s archetype of hapless lecturer and dense don may find a good home just about anywhere you are thirty, you are in your fourth year of researching the role of dwarfs in seventeenth-century Spanish portraiture (with a nod towards Veronese), you have spent a fruitless year dilating on Oriental motifs in Regency caricature, and your funding is up for annual review. Evelyn Waugh's poor Paul Pennyfeather from *Decline and Fall*, sent down for indecent behavior ("I expect you'll be becoming a schoolmaster, sir. That's what most of the gentlemen does, sir, that gets sent down for indecent behavior"), might serve as fair warning for what happens when things turn south, and why a graduate student should avoid attention. David Lodge's campus trilogy with Philip Swallow and Morris Zapp—*Changing Places*, *Small World*, and *Nice Work*—can also do a good turn to any young adjunct professor contending with his generation's Stanley Fish.

But as a guide to studying the likes of art history years on end (which can include a visiting lectureship here or there), Randall Jarrell's *Pictures from an Institution* is the closest one comes to Baedeker's. Jarrell's erudite putdown of Benton, based on the poet's experience teaching at the progressive Sarah Lawrence College for Women in the late 1940s, should be awarded each year as the booby-prize to the most ill-treated graduate student in the realm—a consolation that life at school has always been strange, and that progress can sometimes mean a stampede over your mangled corpse. The life of the mind may be all that and a bag of chips, but it's nothing up against the life of the stomach. The motivating factors of grad-life can be as base as they come.

At the opposite extreme to grad-life is the undergraduate. At the Benton where I studied art history as a graduate student, and which I had an occasion to revisit, the dew that collects on these princes and princesses is the ichor of Greek mythology. Here a fountain replenishes itself every year with fresh faces. A Rhine flows with red-cheeked Kewpies. Fashionable gamines smell of Kiehl's. Blond tresses sprout Mikimoto. These undergraduates have been imbued

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with an admiration for their elders and a sinfully sophisticated libido. They are the reason Benton exists—forget Spanish portraiture and Regency caricature. They need teaching assistants, and whether you know it or not, for them you are to assist. "At Benton they wanted you really to believe everything that they did, especially if they hadn't told you what it was."

The daily psychodrama mostly unfolds in the afternoons, during office hours in the Brutalist building you called home. The slender legs and arms of future film-makers, auction-house workers, and assistants on the Council on Foreign Relations litter the corridors like limbs from sacrifice. Across from your temporary office, a professor in Chinese art slams her door pointedly at your arrival. You press into your fourth decade of life, but you have yet to be accorded the respect that comes from adulthood. The fact that you are the most educated, privileged person who is not a felon or insane to live this far below the poverty line is not lost on you. You take a pauper's pride in penury, as though asceticism has focused you on your studies and weakened you from deviation. The queerness of the situation can be downright pleasurable.

> [W]hen I dream I'm back at Benton it's as if I were in a hothouse or a—or with the Lotus-Eaters. I can feel Benton all over me like a warm bath, and I try to move my arms and legs, and I can't and I say to myself, "you've got to get out of here. You've got to get out of here!" and then I wake up.

"To get out of here," you endure strange circumstances. Without teaching assistantships, study carrels, and library privileges, you and your fellow Nibelungs would be out of Nibelheim. Tenured faculty would be forced to grade papers. Alberich would be less than pleased. You can also forget researching Spanish dwarfs for the foreseeable future.

Sometimes friends ask what it was like to study at Benton, expecting stories of radicalism and ramparts. But of course progressivism on the inside can seem downright conservative. "If Benton had had an administration building with pillars it could have carved over the pillars: *Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you feel guilty.*" And as Gertrude notes: "Americans are so conformist that even their dissident groups exhibit the most abject conformity."

As in any institution with a healthy department of semiotics and a school of "modern culture and media," by the nature of subject matter alone a department of art history can seem old-fashioned, no matter how radical the instruction. Compared to the larger field of art history, Benton's department might even be tame. The assumption of progressiveness often leads to a complacency in appropriating the latest in what's new. Radicalism ten years out of date can be as decorous as tea and biscuits. Likewise, the same graduate students who might lament the radicalization of art history still bemoan Benton's retardation in radical teaching. To take an unintended lesson from Roger Kimball's *Tenured Radicals*, if tenure will result from radicalism, then radical they must become. Accommodation is the surest path out of Benton and perhaps the only way to get a job. The border between idealism and a life out of poverty is one that graduate students eagerly line up to cross.

In fact, at Benton, the biggest faux pas is not rooted in bad politics but in bad manners. "Almost all the people there were agreed about everything, and glad to be agreed, and *right* to be agreed." No one likes to have bulls run in the china shop. From the most senior tenured faculty member down to the most meager first-year grad student, relationships are built on codependence—and often mistrust. The faculty might yank your funding at any moment. You might try to unionize your fellow grad-students or make a general stink. Meanwhile, everyone badmouths each other in a cosmic circle of who-slept-with-whom-a-decade-ago gossip. It would make a spinster blush. And so it goes.

But somewhere along the line something gives, and most often it is the art that gives.

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> If you had given a Benton student a pencil and a piece of paper, and asked her to draw something, she would have looked at you in helpless astonishment: it would have been plain to her that you knew nothing about art.

To put it another way, as Waugh writes in *Brideshead Revisited*: "'Charles,' said Cordelia, 'Modern Art is all bosh, isn't it?'"

"'Great bosh.'"

Art needs defending from a great deal of bosh—not necessarily the bosh of Modern Art, which I rather enjoy—but from the many accepted practices of what one might call anti-art. Every day, the next generation of art historians are rendered incapable of doing a thing about it.

Anti-art was part of my reason for visiting old Benton. I had been invited to give a talk—not by Benton, but by the Intercollegiate Studies Institute—on why I had left the school's art history program without taking a degree.[1] It was something of a sore subject for everyone involved (in particular, my mother). *Brideshead*, of all books, provided a point of departure for my thinking. A subtext on art underlies this novel, especially if you consider Charles's early comparison between Collins, "the embryo don," and Sebastian.

Without venturing into the superlatives of "Against Interpretation," Susan Sontag's essay "against the revenge of the intellect," I came to wonder if good art history could depend on whether a practice revives art or fossilizes art—between what one might call the Flyte and Collins approaches. I also wondered whether one could see a correlation between the regenerative properties of scholarship and the generosity (or lack thereof) of the professoriate—both words coming out of the same root for "birth." This is a touchy subject. But when you believe that the achievement of art adds up to more than the sum of the social and material circumstances of its creation, as do I, you have to think that your sense of economy is different from that of a parsimonious don whose approach is to divide up the spoils of production and take most of it for keeps.

The temperament of a critic is, alas, the opposite of today's art historian, and art history could use more critics. I had forgotten how enfeebling the "open" atmosphere of the university had become until I returned to Benton. As an art critic for this magazine, I rarely encounter a hostile gallery or museum. Except for the boorish Whitney, almost everyone welcomes the attention of a review, however critical. But at a progressive school like Benton, where all the important truths of life have been agreed upon beforehand and heaven is fast on its way to earth, no one wants to hear a peep. Upon the announcement of my talk, rumor has it, the faculty at Benton confabulated, and somewhere along the line it was understood that one professor from the department would attend. Two professors would have confessed genuine interest; zero professors, a sign of intimidation. But one was just enough to keep an eye on things, enforce the silent treatment, and radiate bad vibes.

And so it went off as it did. The talk was loaded with praise for Benton (Benton had accepted me, funded me, and imparted the lesson that academia wasn't for everyone). But minds had been made up. When I approached the lone professor afterwards and offered what we in the real world might call good manners (an extended hand, a "thanks for coming"), the professor responded "it's your trip," turned, and spontaneously combusted. The grad students meanwhile slunk down the side aisles. Although a number of them had sent words of encouragement before my talk, few asked questions after it. All of them—friends and colleagues, I had supposed—declined an invitation to dinner, usually by means of the old mafia trick of speaking with hand cupped over mouth. Whispering, cigarette-smoking shadows, the embryo dons slipped into the night, surely never to make eye contact with me again. They have their priorities at Benton, and criticism isn't one of them. Doubtless they wondered where I went wrong.

1 "Why I left Brown," a talk by James Panero, was delivered on November 9 in 102 Wilson Hall, Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island.

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New poems
by Joshua Mehigan & John Foy

In the home of my sitter

Mrs. Duane Krauss, sure of her solitude,
grimaced between the kitchen alcove's cryptic
lesser motifs of Elvis and Saint Jude,
herself the central subject of the triptych:
her young-old country cheeks and looming bust,
the timely smile, gathered around a lie.
She called me "dear," she bowed, she briefly fussed,
then turned to pat her mother's china dry.

I did my part. I showed how bright I was,
how self-assured. But I lacked common sense.
Even the dogs there knew—and not because
she humbled them with cozy sentiments—
that friends, not being family, not quite,
keep out of trouble and keep out of sight.

* * *

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Across the white hill swallows fanned and scattered,
drawing my eye along till I could see
atop the hill—tilted and mossy, flattered
by early sun—an old barn, tempting me.
Morning to suppertime not much else mattered.
They must've known. I wanted them to know.
Morning to suppertime their still den chattered
with *Meet the Press* and Christian radio.

Patient, I watched the barn's roof simplify
to silhouette, and the hillside's azure glow
pass, as the night retuned my errant eye,
to static white, the white of moonlit snow,
while those four faces I've not seen again
kept to the borrowed twilight of the den.

* * *

One face there, bright as ripening persimmon,
still a bit bitter, seldom looked at me:
that quiet *Vater* stooped amid his women,
who let his lenses flash for privacy.
High in the shadow of a naked rafter,
his stuffed barn owl outspread its furious wings,
a household daemon to discourage laughter,
unnecessary talk, and touching things.

* * *

Mother, my young, my beautiful rescuer!—
so late, so long, I might be waiting still,
my pure heart wondering always where you were,
if not for those four strangers on their hill,
who, loath to form a fair impression of me,
simply did not, as you must always, love me.

—Joshua Mehigan

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Long live rock

I lived for so long in that edifice,
that house of decline, where all my dreams
of rock stardom, never really mine,
existed like radioactive ghosts,
hyperexcitable and glamorous.
Electric guitars, I thought, would redeem
the dying I endured behind machines.
But that redemption never came to pass.
Instead, hysteria. The rock idols
fell foul of their dead counterparts, the ghouls
from that film where failures walk the earth,
and there was disembowelment and betrayal
in the psychic house of the incredible.
My labor was no more than it was worth.

—John Foy

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Route 17

The ancient evening is distempered
by a brutal wash of luminescence
that is Route 17 during Christmas
—a highway and a holiday well-matched,
a place and time profitably bound
up in a storm of white light and commerce:
Tool Town, Bennigan's, Filene's
Basement. December's overhead
split by Boeing 747s
headed for Newark, I could hardly hear
the frantic conversation in my ear
as we sat in traffic under ten
Santas on top of a Plymouth dealer's
roof, their big hands turned up to heaven.

—John Foy

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Theater

Purrs of self-satisfaction

by Mark Steyn

"I live in a liberal community, which is happy to bring into question things about this country."

That's Stephen Sondheim talking to *Time* magazine earlier this year. The line came back to me after November 2, when the losers, momentarily stunned to discover their arguments had been unpersuasive, quickly recovered to damn the majority of the electorate as boobs and bigots. One doesn't wish to overplay the red state/blue state thing, but it seems to me that, *pace* Jane Smiley, Maureen Dowd, et al., the "ignorance" is not on the red side. Red staters are very aware of the blue states because we live in a blue-state culture: I don't mean just Dan Rather, Peter Jennings, and the boring local Gannett monodaily staffed by "diverse" J-school graduates who all think alike, but 99 percent of movies and sitcoms and non-country pop songs. A red stater is exposed to blue-state thinking every time he switches on the TV.

By contrast, except for the biennial trauma of election day, blue staters can live blissfully unaware of red-state culture. There are occasional disruptions: the tenured professor picks his car up from the body shop, pulls out on the highway and finds the grease monkey's re-tuned the radio to some frightful right-wing talk-show. But he punches the button and he's back on NPR and all is well again. Who knows what those hayseeds in the heartland get up to? Bible study? Deer camp? Gay-lynching night? Whatever.

That's what you hear in that Sondheim quote—"the purr of self-satisfaction," as Terry Teachout calls it, "the well-upholstered lap of comfortable certitude." If Sondheim were as questioning as he claims to be, he might question why his "liberal community" is so unquestioning about itself. But even after a catastrophic election loss some things aren't open to question.

With that in mind, the Roundabout's belated Broadway premiere of *Twelve Angry Men* (at the American Airlines Theatre) is an archetypal product of Sondheim's "community." Written for television by Reginald Rose half-a-century ago, it is, on the face of it, a courtroom drama. Not a courtroom drama in the sense of Agatha Christie's *Witness for the Prosecution* (a more or less precisely contemporary play), or "Perry Mason," or even the O. J. Simpson and Scott Peterson trials: in traditional specimens of the genre, fictional or real, the outcome is always in doubt; that's why the moment when the judge asks, "Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, have you reached a verdict?" is one of the most reliable of dramatic conventions. As the eponymous jury is instructed at the opening of *Twelve Angry Men*, "One man is dead. The life of another is at stake. If there is a reasonable doubt, then you must bring me a verdict of 'not guilty.'" But the life of another isn't really ever at stake. Even if you've never seen Rose's original CBS play, or the famous

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Henry Fonda movie version, or Harold Pinter's West End production, or the Jack Lemmon TV movie, or the gazillions of cheap'n'cheerful dinner-theater revivals, I don't think I'm giving anything away when I say that the black juvenile delinquent accused of stabbing his abusive father to death in their tenement is found not guilty. The outcome is never in doubt.

The verdict isn't the point, of course. Instead, the play makes the case for the great "liberal community" virtue of "questioning." Twelve white men file into the sweltering heat of Jury Room 2-A to begin deliberating the fate of a sixteen-year-old ne'er-do-well. The foreman calls the vote. Eleven of them know he's guilty, but one—Juror Number Eight, an architect—is a decent open-minded man prepared to be skeptical. If the other eleven were hoping to have things wrapped up early and get out of the sweatbox, it's not going to happen now that this guy's digging in. Skepticism *is* a virtue and perhaps in 1954 even a stage novelty. But since then liberal "questioning" has curdled into that reflexive unidirectional skepticism exemplified by Sondheim's remark: Bush won the election? He must've stolen it. America invaded Iraq? It's all about oil, or Halliburton. On stage, reflexive skepticism is even more oppressive. If you read about a murder trial of a black teen in the newspaper, he might be guilty or he might be innocent, or he might be like O. J. and get acquitted even though the blood of a man he claims never to have met is all over the inside of his locked car. There are all kinds of possibilities. But in *Twelve Angry Men* the moment we hear that the accused is a black teenager we understand that the eventual verdict is a given and it's those judging him who are really on trial. We're in for a dazzling display of didactic liberalism.

Predictable as that is, it's a rare director who can resist the further over-egging of the pudding. In the Sidney Lumet film, Henry Fonda played Mister Decency, Juror Number Eight, and the other eleven were the likes of Lee J. Cobb. Wouldn't it have been faintly more interesting the other way round? Surely. But directors have a hard time overcoming Rose's paint-by-numbers approach to characterization. This is jury selection Hollywood-style, with everyone a predictable type: The Harrassed Foreman, The Loudmouth, The Wise Guy, The Working Stiff, The Uptight Businessman, The Li'l Ol' Mitteleuropean Refugee Watchmaker, The Big Bully With The Big Secret. You wouldn't expect these lummoxes to get the rhetorical better of our American Everyman architect, and they don't, burdened by dialogue designed to reveal them as witless blowhards. "I'm sick and tired of facts," Juror Number Ten says. "You twist 'em any way you like. Know what I mean?"

Yeah, I do. But, if Rose had really been interested in demonstrating the powers of persuasion of one man over eleven others, he could at least have been sporting enough not to saddle them with lines complaining about how these pesky details are just a way of gittin' bulldozed by them—waddaya call 'em?—intelleckshualls. If the sentiment sounds vaguely topical, it's less because the great unwashed utter it than because their betters keep putting it in their mouths.

Juror Number Eight, on the other hand, talks like Walter Cronkite channeling Edward R. Murrow for a civics class homily: "No-one can really know," he says. "But we have a reasonable doubt and this is a safeguard which has enormous value in our system." I'd love to hear the director give line readings for that clump because I don't believe there's any way of saying it which will make it come like human conversation. As Number Eight, Boyd Gaines is less iconic than Henry Fonda but looks even more lankily decent, the cleanest-cut of all. Almost off-puttingly wholesome, he seems less an archetypal Common Man than a prefigured group-therapy host helping an unpromising gaggle work through their ignorance: Confronted by bigotry, he explains patiently, "It's very hard to keep personal prejudice out of a thing like this. And no matter where you run into it, prejudice obscures the truth."

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The worthiness of the piece is less obvious in the 1957 film because Sidney Lumet wrung every last drop of the atmospherics. There's no air conditioning, everyone's in suits, and Lumet's camera work intensifies the heat, the claustrophobia, the irritation. The American Airlines Theatre, alas, is an antiseptic box, and so a one-set play that ought to be ideal for our straitened stage proves instead a trickier proposition. Scott Ellis, the Roundabout's director, never quite figures out a way to do close-ups, and his one staging trick is mighty disruptive: There's a point in the play where a bunch of jurors go to the men's room, and Ellis mechanically moves the set to allow us to follow them in there. In a production where Allen Moyer's settings and Michael Krass's class-conscious costumes are otherwise sober, unobtrusive evocations of time and place, it's a jolt: for a moment you wonder if Ellis will fly in urinals like the chandelier in *Phantom of the Opera*.

But just because there isn't a lot of scenery doesn't mean the actors can't vigorously chew what's at hand. Confronted by this slab of mid-century TV carpentry, Ellis decides you might as well go with the grain. The climactic moment in the jury room comes during an angry showdown between Number Eight (Boyd Gaines) and Number Three (Philip Bosco) in which the latter loses his temper and roars "I'll kill him, I'll kill him"—the very words uttered by that young black teen and used so damningly at his trial. "You don't really mean that, do you?" replies Boyd Gaines, calmly and a little too smugly for my tastes. But even then Ellis isn't willing to let the exchange speak for itself, staging it with a lot of lemme-at-him business more reminiscent of the Cowardly Lion or Bob Hope demanding Bing restrain him than any real violence. It's terrific fun in some ways. Eschewing their penchant for dud TV stars, the Roundabout has assembled a crack cast of character actors, the best of whom—like Bosco—are hugely entertaining even when they're merely lumbering pieces in Rose's heavily telegraphed chess game.

But the fact remains that there's no real drama here. Years ago on Broadway, they used to talk about "tired businessman" shows—plenty of gals, plenty of leg. This is a show for tired liberals: you can slump into your seat after a hard day secure in the knowledge that no matter how many times you nod off in the course of the evening you'll have missed no plot twists. The good guy up against the odds will overcome them and you'll be able to congratulate yourself on having taken his side all along. Though he would be insulted by the comparison to such a hoary piece of telly drama, it is a perfect play for those of a Sondheimian "questioning" disposition. It congratulates you for being the kind of person who likes to be "challenged" without being in the least bit challenging.

If *Twelve Angry Men* is a civics lesson, *Nine Parts of Desire* is a lesson in a country without civics. In Saddam Hussein's Iraq, there are no citizens, and thus no obligations of citizenship, and certainly no rights. You exist only at the pleasure of your rulers. One woman, Layal, paints a watercolor of a dead friend, who made the mistake of telling another that she'd been raped by Saddam's son Uday. "They stripped her, covered her in honey and watched his Dobermans eat her," Layal explains.

Nine Parts of Desire (at the Manhattan Ensemble Theatre) takes its name from the hadith of a seventh-century imam, Ali ibn Abu Talib: "God created sexual desire in ten parts; then he gave nine parts to women and one part to men." If that makes it sound like a *Vagina Monologues* on the Tigris, don't worry, it's not—though the title does invite comparison and remind you that in this new war the dog that didn't bark is an otherwise noisy western feminist lobby with nothing to say about the distinguishing feature of most of the Islamic world: its reduction of half the population at best to chattels, often to house arrest and, in extreme circumstances, to dog food. The women here are raped, brutalized, deadened or—in the more fortunate cases—exiled, but somewhere down deep some kind of secret

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desire endures—not always sexual, but primal and fierce. It's a play about survival in isolation. "I cannot separate myself from them," Layal, a favored court whore (her designation), says of the women she paints. But totalitarian systems are very good at keeping people separate, and for much of the time Joanna Settle's staging communicates very well the separateness of these women, the emotional loneliness of a society where you're never truly alone.

All nine Iraqis are played by Heather Raffo with minimal costume changes. The merest adjustment of her abaya, and the fleshy Bedouin wife is a boppy westernized teen. I wondered at times about whether it might have been more powerful with a full company, but a cast that size is pretty much out of the question off-Broadway, and the show is as much about these women's impact on the writer herself as anything else. Miss Raffo is a blonde Catholic Midwesterner who performs, like Sinatra, with a tumbler of whisky and plenty of cigarettes. But she is, in fact, half-Iraqi: her father is part of the vast Ba'ath-generated diaspora and she's spent a decade compiling the material for this work.

Miss Settle's production uses the space well: Antje Ellermann's set looks like it's been blasted apart leaving pertinent debris —blankets, books, painting materials— amid a perimeter of sandbags. A pool of water stands in for the Tigris. At one level, it represents the Amariya shelter in Baghdad, on which a smart bomb landed during the 1991 Gulf War. But at another level it's a ruined country. Colin Powell's alleged Pottery Barn advice to the President—you break it, you own it—seems to imply that what's broken in Iraq is the plant—the physical landscape, the infrastructure, the sewers and sub-stations. But on Miss Raffo's bomb site of a country it's the people who are wrecked.

She's not the most felicitous of writers, and her flights of fancy tend to nose-dive into purply goo. The play opens with the traditional female figure who leads the mourning at Arab funerals tossing a bunch of shoes into the river and doing a lot of generic travelogue exoticism about the souls, and soles, of the departed. The heart sinks faster than the footwear. But when Miss Raffo sticks closer to docudrama she's on surer ground. *Nine Parts of Desire* isn't polemical. It doesn't have to be, given what she's dealing with. The horror stories are related plainly—just the facts, ma'am. In the most effective dictatorships, they don't get *you*, they get anyone you care about. "One woman I was with," says a woman named Hooda, "they bring her three-month-old baby outside the cell. They put this woman's baby in a bag with starving cats. They tape-record the sound of this and of her rape and they play it for her husband in his cell."

Somehow the American left wound up on the wrong side of this story. It's one thing to take a Kissingerian realpolitik approach before the war and say "He's no threat, what's he ever done to us?"—though he's done plenty. But to complain after the fact is a surreal glimpse into the dead heart of the parochial left. Hooda wonders, "How could these people have liberated themselves?" But who cares? All the guy in the cell had to do was put up with his wife being raped and his children eaten for another few years, maybe a decade or two —after all, Saddam couldn't last forever, and who's to say *his* kids were as bad as Cheney and Rumsfeld said they were?

Miss Raffo doesn't spell it out like that, and she doesn't have to. Most of her characters are anti-war or ambivalent or victims of a chaotic occupation. But as Hooda says, after watching a British "peace" march from her exile in London and pondering the flawed state of post-war Iraq, "I prefer this chaos to permanent repression and cruelty." The lone American woman among Miss Raffo's characters is noisily opposed to the invasion, but stops herself in mid-flow, "I should get out, get something to eat. I'm fat. I should go to the gym. I can watch it at the gym. People work out to the war."

That's a very pointed moment, but the

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author prefers to leave it hanging. I would hazard that, whatever her feelings about Bush and the new Iraq, she has little time for the western "peace" movement which, even more so than usual in these circumstances, is objectively on the other side: Michael Moore, for example, has hailed the head-hacking insurgents as Iraq's minutemen. I'm a Montrealer and my city has the largest number of Iraqi émigrés in North America. Eight months after the fall of Baghdad, after an endless diet of quagmire coverage from CNN and the CBC, the night of Saddam's capture was marked by Iraqi Montrealers driving through the streets honking their horns and waving flags in celebration. It's very curious to me that in *Nine Parts of Desire* every piece of direct testimony—the rapes, the dead kids—seems to have been selected as an unsparing rebuke to those who suggest that there was something illegitimate—both morally and technically—about "Mr. Hussein"'s removal from office.

On the other hand, the more self-consciously writerly moments—the desert blarney about the shoes, etc.—seems more ambivalent, not to say coy and inert. It's as if Heather Raffo the Iraqi understands viscerally the side she's on but that Heather Raffo the Playwright feels obliged to tap-dance around the question and thereby remain true to both her identity groups. This limits the show's power: as compelling as these individual women are, the play as a whole balks at following their stories to the logical conclusion. It's undoubtedly the case that most working theater folk and most paying customers feel the Iraq war was a mistake. This show lets those so disposed off the hook, allowing you to feel "moved" by the "plight" of the Iraqi people while retaining your belief that it's all too complex and foreign for you to do anything about.

Somewhere in the course of its most searing vignettes I found myself dwelling on the image of Iraq itself as a woman, and wondered why that seemed vaguely familiar. Saddam, of course. In the Barbara Cartland phase of his dictatorship, he started writing historical romances, allegorical novels like *Zabibah and the King*, in which the king was a thinly disguised Saddam and Zabibah was Iraq. They turned it into a big show in Baghdad which got reviews to die for from critics anxious to avoid that fate. It looked like being a Mesopotamian *Cats* until the liberation killed the box-office. As it is, an evening of excerpts from Saddam's romantic fantasy punctuated by survivors' accounts of the reality might bring home even to the New York theater's reflex pacifists the moral choices underpinning this war.

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Art

Maillol at Marlborough

by Karen Wilkin

There are still restaurants in the smaller cities of France where local functionaries and dignitaries lunch every day—places where the regulars have their own napkin rings. There are no surprises in these solid, reassuring establishments. The classic, substantial dishes of *la cuisine bourgeoise* never change, apart from subtle responses to what is in season. The ingredients are excellent, and everything is prepared with skill and care. There may be a little more butter than current urban taste dictates, but the diner is assured of pleasure and satisfaction.

As this fall's splendid exhibition at Marlborough Gallery made clear, the sculpture of Aristide Maillol (1861–1944) can be described more or less the same way.[1] The analogy is emphasized by the remarkable "tasting menu" with which the exhibition began: a vitrine of twenty small sculptures spanning four decades of the artist's career, from a kneeling washerwoman dated 1896 to a seated nude of his model and muse, Dina Vierny, dated 1937. As in the best of those comforting restaurants in the French provinces, there was nothing startling here, apart from the happy surprise of being able to see so many of these wonderful little pieces together. The array of sturdy bronzes, none over twelve inches in its largest dimension, constituted a (literally) miniature retrospective. It was not only an accounting of the principal themes and poses that Maillol pursued throughout his long life as a sculptor, but also a preview of the larger, better-known works—half-life-size, life-size, and monumental—that made up the rest of the show. Confronted with the vitrine full of familiar, suavely modeled figures, words such as "consistancy," "heartiness," "economy," and "harmony"—those bourgeois desiderata—came to mind.

The selection at Marlborough reinforced the obvious fact that Maillol became "Maillol" early on. His visual language was established almost from the start of his career as a sculptor: a kind of streamlined, personal classicism, with the figure conceived as a structure of sleek, swelling volumes, pared down to suggest ideal geometric archetypes.

The earliest works in the Marlborough show—the vitrine's *Washerwoman*, with her arched back and outstretched arms, and a half-life-size *Female Bust*, with smooth cheeks and a thick roll of hair, both dated 1896—were already fully realized in terms of the blunt forms, all seamless transitions and smooth convexities, that constitute the typical Maillol figure. Only the sinuous curves of the washerwoman's sleeves and the spreading ripples of her skirt-hem—evidence that Maillol was not immune, at least at the beginning of his career, to the all-purpose, sensuous convolutions of *fin de siècle Art Nouveau*—attest to the sculpture's early date.

1 "Aristide Maillol: Maillol and America" was on view at Marlborough Gallery, New York, from October 27 to November 27, 2004.

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A small version, dated 1899, of the iconic *Standing Bather Arranging Her Hair*, with her taut torso, angled knee, and lifted arms, was indistinguishable, except for the dramatic change in scale (and all that that implies) of the exhibition's life-size nude in the same pose, cast in 1930. But subtle alterations of emphasis over time revealed themselves in other sculptures. Generally, in the last decade of Maillol's career, his figures became a little less specific, but the distinction is one of nuance, not of dramatic change.

Maillol's subject matter was fixed at the beginning of his career, as well. He was preoccupied throughout his long life with the female figure, especially the female nude, particularly with youthful, firm, rather stocky bodies. Among the small sculptures, a single elegantly slim *Young Man* (1930)—the exhibition's only male image—looked slightly bewildered among the opulently fleshed women standing, bending, kneeling, and crouching around him. In contrast to the deliberate, thick-limbed female figures, the lone male seemed notably delicate and agile, a Donatello not among the wild beasts, but among the earth mothers. Elsewhere, among the larger sculptures, a quick survey of titles and subjects underscored Maillol's single-mindedness. *Air*? A female nude. *Night*? A female nude. *Debussy*? A female nude. *Monument to Cézanne*? A female nude. Similarly, *Thought*, *Spring*, and *France*.

The symmetry and geometric clarity of these figures declared Maillol's fundamental allegiance to the classical, but their refined, disciplined simplicity made them modern. For all his loyalty to the legacy of antiquity, there was no trace of the academy's retrograde values in Maillol's brand of classicism. Quite the contrary, as a small group of drawings at Marlborough revealed; he actively repudiated the debased version of neo-classicism taught in French art schools at the end of the nineteenth century. Originally trained as a painter, Maillol studied with that master of the airbrushed classicizing nude, Alexandre Cabanel, as well as with several other acclaimed *Pompiers*, which seems to have left him with a solid foundation in life drawing, a taste for antique prototypes, an enduring dedication to barely hidden sensuality, and a life-long hatred of the academic. Maillol's rigorously simplified, soft-edged charcoal and pencil drawings are the antithesis of the "licked," meticulously modeled studies he would have produced as a student, although he plainly aspired to a classical transformation of the complexities of human flesh into idealized near-geometry.

Yet the economy of Maillol's drawings is deceptive; the thick, smudged contours do not simply describe poses or embody geometry, but express weight and mass. His strongest drawings, such as *Recumbent Nude with Drapery* (1920), in which the pneumatic figure is flattened and folded into the rectangle of the paper, depend on tension between the illusion of fleshy volumes implied by loose shading and the fact of the flat, clearly bounded support. In some drawings, the figure seems barely contained by the dimensions of the sheet or explodes beyond its edges, squeezing the space out of the image and making the viewer recapitulate the intensity of the sculptor's gaze. Conversely, when Maillol gives the figure too much illusionistic space to inhabit, as in the aggressively foreshortened *Dina* (1936), the result can be predictable, even conventional.

Still, the fierce dialogue between implied mass and literal flatness in his best works on paper make you remember that when Matisse was struggling to encapsulate his perceptions of the brilliant seaside light of Collioure (during that astonishing summer of 1905 when he plunged headlong into what became known as Fauvism), he frequently visited Maillol's studio in nearby Banyuls, the sculptor's birthplace. (At the time, Maillol was also struggling—to make the celebrated large seated figure, elbow resting on her knee, known as *The Mediterranean*, which is not in the Marlborough exhibition.) Later, however, Matisse denied that there had been any cross-fertilization between them. "Maillol's sculpture has the ripeness of a plump fruit which makes me want to reach out and touch it," Matisse said.

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He later added, "We never discussed sculpture. For we could not understand one another. Maillol worked in masses like the ancients and I worked in arabesques like the Renaissance sculptors. Maillol didn't like taking risks, and I couldn't resist them."

In the end, no matter how assured or accomplished the individual sculpture, it's that absence of risk-taking that informs any large gathering of Maillols, including the Marlborough show. As you move through the gallery, you recognize nearly identical versions of a high-breasted, chunky torso, with minor alterations in the position of limbs or slight shifts in the distribution of weight, with or without heads—a thrifty acknowledgment that if something worked once, it would work again. Rodin employed a more radical version of this sort of thing, but for him, literally assembling pre-existing legs, arms, and torsos offered a kind of liberation from the literal, a way into near-abstraction.

Risky or not, there are many first-rate sculptures in the Marlborough show, including that delicious *Standing Bather Arranging Her Hair* and the equally well-known, no less delectable, artfully cropped *Young Girl Walking in Water*, with her energetically arched back. The monumental *Air* (first state, 1938), tenuously poised on a hip and an elbow, legs extended dancer-like, in defiance of gravity, is a stand-out. Its voluptuous forms are made more tactile and sensuous by the faint, faint sheen of the gorgeously dull surface of lead in which it is cast. It's instructive to be able to compare *Air* with its cognate, the exhibition's other large, reclining nude cast in lead, *Monument to Cézanne* (1912–1925). In the earlier work, the figure rests more solidly on the ground plane—the pose suggests a Martha Graham contraction, with the insistent vertical formed by the figure's upright neck and supporting arm implying she has cheated, pressing herself erect against the floor instead of pulling herself up into space. A convenient crumple of drapery supports the outstretched arm, while the other end of the drape, neatly folded over the supporting arm, oddly recalls the accoutrements of Canova's marble portrait of the reclining, bare-breasted Pauline Bonaparte at the Villa Borghese. Only the oversized extended arm and the giant hand—an homage to Michelangelo? an evocation of Cézanne's wrenched proportions?—animates this strangely static sculpture.

The exhibition is accompanied by a handsomely illustrated catalogue with a curious essay, "Maillol and America," by Bertrand Lorquin, curator of the Musée Maillol, Paris. It is full of interesting information about the earlier history of Mailloil's reception in this country. Things go awry when M. Lorquin attempts to deal with more recent phenomena. He compares Maillol to Mark di Suvero because both are open-air sculptors; he claims a "spiritual community" between the work of Maillol and Mark Rothko that "transcends the sterile wrangle opposing figuration and abstraction." He also finds "rock-paintings sometimes constituted by nothing other than a coating of iron oxide" to be "strangely reminiscent of the chromatic reduction that Rothko created in his canvases." Maybe it's the translation. Fortunately, at Marlborough, the evidence of Maillol's sculpture was presented directly, with many of the larger-scaled works installed on the low plinths the artist himself is said to have preferred, so that the solemn, elegant figures could make their case without intermediaries. Many of them speak eloquently indeed.

Exhibition notes

"The Art of Romare Bearden" at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.
October 14, 2004–January 9, 2005

The Romare Bearden retrospective that Ruth Fine organized for the National Gallery of Art has now arrived at the Whitney Museum of American Art where it is playing to large, boisterous crowds—not surprisingly, for even in its rare dark mo-

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ments, Bearden's is an art of powerful sensuality and considerable emotional uplift.

Although the show has traveled to two other cities since opening in Washington last fall and has still one stop remaining (the High Museum, beginning in January) there is something particularly appropriate about the Whitney as a venue. This isn't simply because Bearden (who was born in 1911 and died in 1988) spent his entire career in New York, where he made collages depicting contemporary black life in Harlem and the rural south, as well as more exotic subjects such as mysticism and witchcraft. It's because Bearden's art answers the question implicit in the museum's name, "What's 'American' about 'American art'?" Like many American artists and writers before him, he steeped himself in the culture of Europe—in his case the pictorial culture—internalizing it and refashioning it into a language capable of giving voice to a uniquely American experience, in his case, that of a black living through the sociopolitical conflicts and transformations of his time. (There is an excellent essay in the catalogue by the National Gallery curator Sarah Kennel on Bearden's sources.)

Bearden's language was collage, though it was one he didn't come to until well into his maturity in the mid-1960s. He began as a painter, and a selection of his early work opens the exhibition. It's more revealing than most such "formative years" sections, which one normally hurries through in order to savor the artist's mature work. To be sure there are some respectable but unmemorable Abstract Expressionist pastiches. But what catches the eye are works like *The Ascension of Christ in Glory* (*c.* 1945/1946) and *Madonna and Child* (1945), painted in a manner that alludes both to the cloisonné style of Picasso's *Girl Before a Mirror* (1932) or church stained-glass windows and Byzantine mosaics. What's striking is the sheer number of these religious works and their complete lack of irony or its opposite, cloying sentimentality. Whatever use these devotional subjects served as a foil for stylistic experimentation and discovery, they strike one as bona fide statements of religious faith, and remarkable for being such. It's not the first thing one expects to find in a modern artist. Though it would be two decades before Bearden was to discover his signature idiom (when he would again take on a religious subject in the superb *Expulsion from Paradise* of 1964), these works demonstrate that two critical building blocks of his art are already well in evidence: the centrality of subject and narrative, and pitch-perfect emotional tone.

Bearden's collages, which he began making in earnest around 1963, effectively abandoning painting as his primary artistic medium, are sui generis. Rather than using broad planes of torn paper to create an abstract or quasi-abstract image in the manner of a Picasso or Motherwell, he uses his cut papers representationally, stitching a multiplicity of eclectic, carefully scissored fragments of magazine and newspaper illustrations into a narrative tapestry. Each individual image fragment has something of the character of a single brushstroke or brushed-in area of canvas, and each has its own distinct visual character resulting in abrupt (and deliberate) shifts in type, scale, and point of view from one part of the image to the next. Bearden's art has often been likened to jazz in its discontinuous visual rhythms, a comparison that is entirely apt.

It may seem retrograde for Bearden to have used a canonically modernist artistic form for representational ends, but in fact it was anything but. Although his titles are particular, such as *Lenox Avenue* (1964), Bearden's real subject is memory. Most of his subjects are drawn from childhood recollections of life in Mecklenburg County, North Carolina and Pittsburgh. In some cases they are places and incidents he's never actually experienced but only imagined, as in the wonderful *Apprenticeship of Jelly Roll Morton* (1971), set in a New Orleans brothel. To this end, collage isn't just a formal but a crucial narrative device. The fragmented imagery, the disjunctions of size, scale and texture create a pictorial realm that, how-

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ever much it is anchored in the familiar world around us, nonetheless exists at a remove from it, an allusive realm of imagination and reminiscence.

It's quite startling to think that Bearden was using the same vocabulary as Pop artists—photomechanical reproduction, mass media, and icons of consumer culture—albeit for wholly opposite ends. It makes you realize how very different were his concerns from the artistic mainstream of his time. And in other respects as well, for example in his embrace of narrative during a period when abstraction was in the ascendant, and in his political outlook.

In 1963 he helped form Spiral, an organization of black artists concerned with contributing to the Civil Rights movement through their art. In spite of that, Bearden did not spring to the barricades. There is no polemic in his art. Indeed the opposite. His response to the upheavals of segregation and the Civil Rights movement was to retreat into the secure embrace of the remembered worlds of family, friendship, mystery, and ritual. Bearden was too cultivated and subtle an artist to have settled for the kind of one-dimensional sloganeering that, all too often, forms the sum and substance of political art. Instead, he evoked the condition of his race through his own private experience rather than addressing it explicitly. The image of the train in his Mecklenburg County works refers to, among other things, the south-north migration that took place between the wars. In the end, the power of Bearden's art lies in his ability to express the universal through the personal.

—*Eric Gibson*

"The Aztec Empire" at The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. October 15, 2004–February 13, 2005

Let us suppose that you are living in the great city of Tenochtitlan (today's Mexico City) in the glory days of the Aztec Empire—that is, before the arrival of Cortés and the Spaniards. And let us imagine that you are worried—very, very worried. Will the sun rise tomorrow? What if it doesn't? What if it never comes up again? *We must do something to make sure the sun rises tomorrow or we are doomed!*

Well, luckily for you, the Emperor, the leading nobles, and the chief priests have given this matter a great deal of thought. What we must do, they explain, is have the chief priest rip the hearts out of thousands of living humans, toss the hearts into a large stone container as food for the gods, and then hurl the bloody bodies down the steps of the Great Temple, whereupon they will be carefully butchered, cooked up, and eaten by the elite. *There! That ought to do it!* And sure enough, the sun *does* come up the next day!

Is this what we learn from the monumental exhibition on the Aztecs currently installed at the Guggenheim Museum? Not at all. The existence of human sacrifice is gently alluded to, but certainly not emphasized. The issue of cannibalism is not mentioned at all, although it is an established fact that the Aztecs practiced cannibalism. The overall tone of the exhibition conforms to the prevailing mood of multicultural sensitivity and "understanding," but we should no longer be surprised by that. The museum bookstore has a children's book illustrating this bizarre culture. One sees weirdly jarring images of immaculately dressed small brown people going happily about their daily lives, apparently oblivious to the avalanche of carnage which is the very essence of their culture.

This culture was about death. It was pathologically obsessed with death—brutal, terrifying, vicious death. Skulls, flayed and bloody human victims, coiled rattlesnakes . . . it is not even very useful to try to approach these objects as art. They are essentially cult propaganda objects meant to frighten and intimidate the viewer, then and now. And so they do, with a direct and relentless intensity that is both fascinating and repellent, much like Hitlerian propaganda such as Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the*

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Will. In both cases, there is the veiled threat—the pornography of potential violence. One also notes another similarity: Aztec artwork, like Nazi artwork, contains almost no overt sexual content. It is as though the cult of death had no place for such a simple, human pleasure.

The exhibition at the Guggenheim, however, stands as a monumental and unique achievement. Never has so much (and so much recently discovered) material been assembled outside of Mexico. Included are hundreds of artifacts crafted from stone, ceramic, and even wood that depict Aztec culture from the top to the bottom. We have huge stone sculptures of the mythic plumed serpent as well as small, engaging domestic artifacts. Some of the most appealing works in the show, from our contemporary perspective, are the many powerful portrayals of animals, ranging from a massive green granite coiled rattlesnake to a giant stone flea.

These artists possessed tremendous abilities of observation, but rarely escaped the heavy hand of the state's imperial agenda. In addition, the curators of this show were at great pains to illustrate how the Aztecs had evolved from the earlier Meso-American civilizations, especially the Olmec and Toltec. The result is a marvelous unfolding of this entire culture, and we are given an unparalleled opportunity to grasp the complex enormity of a great world civilization underpinned by terror, mass murder, and cannibalism. Is it not possible that the Spanish had a point when they beheld the sacrifices to Huitzilopochtli at the Great Temple, and were appalled? Even today, we feel a deep and abiding chill after emerging from our close encounter with the Aztec Nation.

There is no question that the world has been fascinated with these cultures of the Western Hemisphere, ever since they were "discovered" in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and there are very good reasons for this. To the West, the realization that there existed vast unknown cities, cultures, and civilizations of which they had known nothing was both a revelation and a shock. To the West, these cities might as well have been on Mars, so alien did they appear. Knowing this, we now see them not merely as exotic specimens (or as innocent victims of Western brutality), but also as isolated laboratory experiments in the human drama. What they did and created, they did alone. No other civilization provided any instruction or model, as did the Egyptians to the Assyrians and Greeks, for example.

One way of looking at these cultures is to think of them in terms of twins separated at birth. The Minnesota Twin Study sought to determine the relative influence of genetics over environment (nature *v.* nurture) in such identical twins. The twin sets were found to be overwhelmingly similar in their behavior despite vast geographical and cultural differences.

Around twelve thousand years ago, one branch of the human family wandered off to a land where no humans had been before. Rising waters then cut them off from their parental stock and they were free to develop on their own. No further help, advice, or clarification was forthcoming from the mainland. The Indians in America were isolated, and thus this unique experiment in human possibilities began to unfold. We study them to learn what those possibilities include.

What happened in the central Mexican part of the hemisphere is now reasonably clear. Beginning with the Olmecs, a series of increasingly complex empires rose and fell with spectacular violence, from Teotihuacán and the Toltecs to the Aztec juggernaut. The essentials, including ritual sacrifice and cannibalism, were present from the start, but had never reached the level of epochal horror achieved by the Aztecs. Even though the Maya in Central America were not the peaceful stargazing philosophers we once thought they were, they never approached the pathology of the Aztecs.

In addition, in other parts of Mexico that were somewhat isolated from the central valleys, different societies developed that

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did not share the sacrificial ethos of the Aztecs and their spiritual forebears. The Tarascans on the West coast not only held the Aztecs at bay, but they were also able to create a much more humane society. Their art and pottery have little of the bone-crushing, fascistic authority typical of Aztec productions. A possible reason for this is that they did not descend from central Mexico's sacrificial societies, but may have had more in common with South American and Inca traditions. Therefore, there seem to have been avenues of choice regarding how these various societies developed. The results were not preordained. Human societies in the Western hemisphere could have evolved in many directions, but in fact a surprisingly high percentage became cultures of death.

How do we begin to make sense of this? An inescapable conclusion is that man is inherently capable of the greatest kind of evil. This is what the Judeo-Christian tradition calls Original Sin, what Kant called "radical evil." In our relativistic, multicultural society, we tend to shy away from such moral language. Call it what you will, though—when we contemplate the Aztecs, we come face to face with a bedrock moral reality of the grimmest sort. It is similar to the moral reality of the Nazi death camps, Stalin's gulag, and the world created by Saddam Hussein—the world now envisioned by Al Qaeda. These worlds are very, very bad. No amount of their art or craft, their beautiful stone or precious metal objects, can ever preclude that *moral* judgment. Thus, although there is no question that the Aztecs and their culture are deeply fascinating, there is also no doubt that the destruction of the Aztec Empire was morally justified. As hard as it is today to say *anything* positive about the Spanish in the New World, we must agree that they were right on this point.

Not so far from the Guggenheim Aztec show, there are a number of churches where religious celebration of a different sort makes an interesting contrast to the dead bodies cascading down the temple steps in homage to Huitzilopochtli. The Christian Eucharist, with its ritual partaking of the body and blood of Jesus Christ, has elements reminiscent of the Aztec rituals. (The Aztecs were fond of pointing out that fact to the Spaniards). This is our common human heritage, which connects us all back to our common origins as *homo sapiens*.

True enough. We are all human. Would moral relativists say that Christian dogma, with its emphasis on forgiveness and redemption, cannot be distinguished from the mass murder that was the very core of the Aztec social enterprise? Did the playing of Beethoven quartets at Auschwitz alter the moral landscape there? In his essay on this exhibit, the chief curator Felipe Solis bitterly laments the destruction of the Aztec Empire by the Spanish. One wonders if the tribes forced to pay tribute to the Aztecs with sacrificial victims would have agreed with his sentiments. Certain human arrangements, although evolving naturally from our common human matrix, are unacceptable. Are there not, finally, some human societies that are so evil that we have no choice but to challenge them with moral authority?

—*Peter Pettus*

"Calder, Miró" at The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.
October 9, 2004–January 23, 2005

A thin black line winds its way through the most joyful and under-celebrated exhibition of the season. Joyful, because the line can take you places you've never been with two familiar artists. Under-celebrated, because the prejudices of the art world are known, and the wonderful, idiosyncratic legacy of the country's first modernist museum does not jibe with more recent, ever-expanding upstarts. No matter. One look at this show and the eyes have it. The visual delights of watching that line jump from painter to sculptor, wire to canvas, Connecticut to Catalonia and back can be electrifying.

The electric potential of exhibiting these two artists together is nothing new. Calder

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and Miró both contributed work to the Spanish Pavilion at the Paris World's Fair in 1937. For many years they also shared the same dealer, Pierre Matisse, and in 1939 Matisse presented the two artists in back-to-back shows. Matisse also provided a conduit between the two artists when separated by the Second World War.

In 1942, when MOMA's first retrospective of Miró travelled to Vassar College, an equal number of Calder's sculptures were added to the Vassar show. A friend noted to Calder that "your pieces gave just that fillip to the Mirós that got them off being too flat and squiggly." Duncan Phillips made a similar discovery in pairing the two artists together through acquisitions in the early 1950s. Later, when Calder joined the Perls Gallerie in the early 1960s, Klaus Perls's first show of Calder's work was through the widely praised "Alexander Calder, Joan Miró." John Canaday, writing in *The New York Times*, called that exhibition "just about perfect" and noted that, taken together, "the element of fantasy is heightened in Calder's impeccably balanced structures and the element of calculation becomes more apparent than usual in Miró's looser inventions." Galerie Beyeler followed with "Miró, Calder" in 1972. Fondation Beyeler is the co-organizer of the current show, which first exhibited at its museum in Basel over the summer in a larger installation.

"Just about perfect" sums up my feelings after seeing these two artists together here, even as this incarnation of the exhibition has notable gaps—including Miró's *Birth of the World* (1925) (back it went from Basel to the Museum of Modern Art). The Phillips has done an excellent job in mounting the work in seamless and edifying ways, from the menagerie of birds and other animals alighting up the first staircase to the newly enlarged final exhibition room, where Miró's massive *Mural Painting for the Terrace Plaza Hotel, Cincinnati* (1947) beckons behind Calder's mobile *Twenty Leaves and an Apple* (1946), his own commission for that hotel (both pieces are on loan from the Cincinnati Art Museum).

Contemporaries, friends, and often long-distance correspondents (Calder could be particularly louche in his postcards), the two artists complement each other in ways that Matisse and Picasso or Manet and Velásquez cannot. Rather than a connection based on competition or influence, here the tie that binds is formed of the elemental. In the shared line one finds a distillation of what modernism could promise, with its attention to surface, and what that promise could achieve across different media.

For both Calder and Miró, two expatriate artists from very different countries living in Paris in the 1920s, the line started with Paul Klee and his *Twittering Machine* (1922). By the time they met each other in 1928, the line extended through biomorphic shapes and a common interest in animals, toys, and the carnivalesque, with Miró's *Carnival of Harlequin* (1924–1925) and *Painting (Circus Horse)* (1927) mirroring Calder's miniature wire acrobats and his circus shows.

Calder, the son and grandson of sculptors, sought to overcome "the impression of mud piled up on the floor"—the mass of sculpture—and reduce sculpture to structural framework. In the line he found a liberation from plastic volume. Miró, likewise, used the line to challenge the classicizing impulse, as he saw it, of Mediterranean art. The line saw them through abstraction in the 1930s (by way of Mondrian). The line tied Miró's wartime *Constellation* series together just as it arced out ever more gracefully in Calder's maturing sculpture.

Oddly, as Miró turned to sculpture later in his life (*Moon Bird*, 1946–1949), it seemed that Calder could do Miró better than Miró could do Miró. Miró's puffed-up, static figures achieved little of the movement and grace, so evident in his paintings, that Calder could channel in mobiles and stabiles. Little attention is given to Miró's sculpture at the Phillips show, which concludes at the 1947 Cincinnati commissions. This is a pity, because it only highlights that what these two artists could achieve together they could not do alone.

—James Panero

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Music

New York chronicle

by Jay Nordlinger

As I have complained before, we are not in a great age for pianists; we are not even in a good age. But that doesn't mean that there aren't great—or near-great—pianists among us, for there surely are: Mikhail Pletnev, Zoltán Kocsis, Yefim Bronfman, Ivan Moravec, Jean-Yves Thibaudet. You will want to add your own pianists (and perhaps subtract a couple of mine). But, in my view, the men I have named would be heralded in any age, for they are top-drawer. It's just that, in our present condition, they stand out all the more.

Pletnev is a Russian, a few years under fifty, who is also a conductor. He founded the Russian National Orchestra in 1990. I don't know how much composing he does, but he is—on the evidence of everything else—one of the most complete musicians we have. He certainly thinks like a composer, when he sits at the keyboard, or stands on a podium. He gets to the heart of a score, treating it with both fidelity and imagination (most of the time). On top of which, he is one of the monster technicians of all time. (I am speaking of his pianistic virtuosity.) Several seasons ago in these pages, I said that he made other big technicians look like Adagio players. That might have been an exaggeration, but not by much.

Recently, Pletnev made three appearances at Avery Fisher Hall, the first a recital—an event that opened Great Performers at Lincoln Center. Pletnev offered a meaty program, consisting of Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms (known to pupils as "the three Bs"). The Bach was the Partita No. 6 in E minor, a work that Pletnev played keenly and sweepingly. He was pianistic, of course—he was seated at a piano—but he was thoroughly Bachian. Seldom have I heard Bach playing so fine; I believe I would have to go back to the young Perahia, and that was a long while ago.

Following the partita were three pieces of Brahms, including the Intermezzo in B minor, Op. 119, No. 1. Pletnev played it so Impressionistically, it might have passed for Debussy—but Brahms would have smiled. And the Beethoven? Pletnev played two sonatas, the first small and modest, the second grand and overpowering. The small one was the Sonata in G, Op. 14, No. 2, in which Pletnev took considerable license—probably too much. And yet he presented much to admire: The middle movement was peculiar, arresting, and the closing Scherzo was chockfull of humor. The bigger sonata was that in C major, Op. 53, known as the "Waldstein." It's curious about this sonata that, famous as it is, it is infrequently played, outside the student realm. Pletnev approached it in a spirit of fantasy—uncannily effective.

The next week, Pletnev joined up with the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra, conducted by Herbert Blomstedt. The orchestra was in town for two concerts belonging to the Great Performers series called "The Classical Romantic: The Music of Johannes Brahms."

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("Classical Romantic" is exactly right, incidentally.) The program for the first concert was the Piano Concerto No. 1 in D minor, and the Symphony No. 2 in D major; the program for the second was the Piano Concerto No. 2 in B flat, and the Symphony No. 4 in E minor. (If you have two concerts—done in concerto/symphony format—you can do the "complete" Brahms piano concertos, but only half of the symphonies. So the Leipzigers picked and chose.)

Blomstedt was born in America but grew up in Sweden; he took over the Gewandhaus Orchestra in 1998, replacing Kurt Masur, who had held that position for twenty-seven years. On the first night, Blomstedt and his bunch were dreadful, pretty much ruining the Piano Concerto No. 1, and making a hash of the Second Symphony—except for the last movement, where they at last woke up, performing like a professional orchestra. Pletnev, too, had a poor night, doing some marvelous playing in that concerto but also some eccentric, sloppy, and altogether unrepresentative playing. Night One did not bode well for Night Two.

But Night Two went better; put cynically, how could it not? Brahms's B-flat concerto is one of the grandest and most sweeping we have, once called "a symphony with piano obbligato." Pletnev played the first movement freely and, for the most part, persuasively, but he also continued with his eccentricity. I am not one to make much of nationality in musical performance—and I hope you aren't, either—but, in both concertos, Pletnev did remind me he is Russian. This was a Russianized Brahms. As he played, Pletnev seemed to be searching out ways to make the music "fresh" or "interesting," certainly to himself. It occurred to me that he might be just slightly bored with these works. I have thought similarly about Rostropovich and the Dvořák Cello Concerto. Players of that instrument find themselves performing that work over and over—do they endeavor, consciously or not, to keep themselves entertained (the score aside)?

As for the orchestra, it was better in the B-flat concerto's first movement than it had been for most of the previous night, but, again, that was saying little. Entrances were blown, horns cracked badly, ensembleship fell down. We often speak of "European standards" of orchestral technique, which is to say low ones—but they are supposed to be balanced by knowing and heartfelt musicianship. On these nights, the Leipzigers often failed on both counts. Where Pletnev was engaged—or trying to be—the orchestra was indifferent, lethargic. And Blomstedt frequently came off as merely dutiful, kapellmeisterish.

I should elaborate: In the United States, "kapellmeister" is kind of a putdown term, referring to a Central European conductor who is uninspired and academic-minded, if competent. On the Continent, however—certainly in the German-speaking countries—"kapellmeister" is a term of honor. That, it should be, of course. Language involves unending robberies, and warpings.

In the second movement, Pletnev began with terrific impetus and drive, but Blomstedt and the orchestra quickly made the music anemic, creaky. One must have heard it—that *creakiness*. The pianist, persevering, treated parts of this movement almost as a scherzo, not so much playing the notes as playing with them. He came back, however, with suitable Brahmsian majesty. And his octaves were frighteningly fast and accurate. But he also missed a fair amount of notes, forgivable in the ordinary pianist, but unusual for this one. As for our poor horn players, they continued to crack, and flat, and otherwise horrify.

The Andante featured a badly out of tune oboe, but a decent cello. (The cello is a solo instrument in this movement, along with the piano.) Pletnev was once again uncharacteristic here: He committed some unseemly pounding. (You might say there is no other kind, but that is debatable.) Toward the end, however, he managed to project the right air of holiness.

The Rondo in this concerto is a surprise, marked Allegretto grazioso. Its admirers consider it a cup of relief, after all that Sturm

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und Drang; others scratch their heads over it, regarding it as mismatched with the rest of the concerto. In any case, Pletnev rendered this music both lightheartedly and substantially, which was a high achievement. He also couldn't help conducting a little, from his seat—which was maybe not a bad idea.

You have heard me say it before, but I should say it again: It always pays to show up in a concert hall; you never know (for sure) what you'll get. Something you think can't miss, does; and something you figure will flop, scores, hugely. Herbert Blomstedt and the Leipzig Gewandhaus turned in a good performance of the Brahms E-minor symphony—a very good one. In place of dryness was bloom; in place of inertia was expressiveness; in place of amorphousness was definition (greater definition, I should say). Entrances were still botched, but these mattered less, for musicianship was heightened. The second movement summoned great warmth, and the third movement was virile and glad. The finale was gripping, bordering on savage. The previous night, they had woken up in the fourth movement; this time they were almost wildly awake, alive.

And that is the way it should have been. For one thing, if you're going to play such familiar music in a capital like New York—music as familiar as Brahms symphonies—you'd better have something on the ball. Otherwise, why waste people's time, and risk your own reputation?

The Leipzigers played an encore, and it was an inevitable one: Brahms's Hungarian Dance in G minor. It had some dash, and some flair, but it really didn't swing (the way Lorin Maazel, for example, would swing it). Blomstedt has much to offer as a conductor. He is more than a "kapellmeister," in the (bastardized) American sense. But—born on these shores or not—he really doesn't swing.

A man who swings and does any number of other things is Yuri Temirkanov, principal conductor of the St. Petersburg Philharmonic. Temirkanov took over this storied orchestra in 1988, and took it over from Evgeny Mravinsky, who led the Philharmonic for fifty years (a world record). Temirkanov—who is also conductor in Baltimore, by the way—is a peculiar musician, not the product of a textbook. Years ago, I was seated next to a distinguished critic when Temirkanov was guest-conducting the New York Philharmonic. At the end of a particular work, the critic said, "He's so weird"—which he did not mean dismissively or even negatively. It was simply true: Temirkanov is highly individualistic in his podium technique and in his interpretations. What he has, chiefly, is musicality, a gift from above.

He came to Carnegie Hall with the St. Petersburg for three concerts, each featuring a concerto soloist. The first evening, it was Hélène Grimaud, the French pianist, who played the Schumann concerto—and played it superbly. Indeed, she presented a model of Romantic piano playing. I have made sharp criticisms of her in the past, so I should report this about her too, although she is not the focus of our St. Petersburg section. (In addition, she played an encore, a Rachmaninoff étude-tableau, which was as fine as the Schumann.) The rest of that concert brought Prokofiev's "Classical Symphony"—peculiar, but beautiful and convincing—and Rachmaninoff's *Symphonic Dances*—flavorful and fun. The worst playing of the evening, sad to say, came in the first encore, which was "The Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy." Poor fairy: She wasn't feeling well, apparently, and was heavy on her feet. I hope she soon recovered.

Night Two featured Vadim Repin, the young violin virtuoso, in the Tchaikovsky concerto, and the orchestra did a suite from *The Love for Three Oranges* (Prokofiev), and, after intermission, the Dvořák Eighth. I was not present for this concert . . . so will move on to Night Three, which began with one of the great Russian showpieces, Rimsky-Korsakov's *Russian Easter Overture*. I have said that I dislike making much of nationality in musical performance, but I will violate my rule again to say that the sound of the St. Petersburg Phil. is overwhelmingly Russian—grainy, brawny, "soulful." (That last is the most clichéd relevant adjective of all.) In

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Temirkanov's hands, the overture was slowish, spooky, and—I'm afraid—soulful. This interpretation had a storytelling quality. At the same time, it could have been more visceral, more exciting. What's a Russian band for?

Appearing as concerto soloist was Lynn Harrell, the American cellist, whose work was Shostakovich's Concerto No. 1 in E flat. This concerto is indelibly associated with Mstislav Rostropovich, having been written for him, dedicated to him, and premiered by him (and also by Mravinsky and the St. Petersburg—or the Leningrad, as it was then called). Moreover, Rostropovich played it—plays it—surpassingly well. But this does not mean that other cellists shouldn't have a go at it, and Harrell's go was excellent.

In the first movement—as throughout—he employed what should be called a Russian sound (regardless of the sound-maker's nationality). He did not play this movement as wildly or manically as others have; he was more measured. But he conveyed the appropriate fear, a huntedness, which Shostakovich imbeds. The second movement is justly famous and loved, a song, really. In it, Harrell issued a variety of tones—half ones, full ones, sweet ones, destitute ones. Never did he indulge in excess; this was strikingly mature playing. In fact, the whole concerto is a serious work that needs to be played by a serious man, as well as a musical one.

Following this songful second movement is an extended cadenza, which Harrell began almost murmuring to himself. He continued to talk—although to the audience as well—and his gauging of rhythms was notably smart. In the closing movement, we had some of that wildness, a raucousness, and Harrell displayed impressive agility. This concerto takes a little technique—consider the man for whom it was written. You can find rawer, more savage interpretations of Shostakovich's Concerto in E flat (I think in particular of Natalia Gutman). But Lynn Harrell touched the heart of it, and—here I go with nationality again—it was not nothing to see all those (Russian) cellists in the orchestra applauding him.

Temirkanov concluded the concert—and his Carnegie residence—with Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 6, the "Pathétique," which is that composer's awful farewell to the world. The conductor drew the opening from some primordial soup; then the music grew, organically. The orchestra's sound was none too pretty, but the symphony benefited from this: The Pathétique is not a Hallmark card. The first movement was utterly unhurried, and yet it was not languid. Entrances were poor (not quite as poor as the Leipzig Gewandhaus's), but these could be overlooked.

The second-movement waltz swirled and pulsed, and I, for one, had never heard the timpani so much: Temirkanov kept urging them on. The third movement—that brilliant march—was loose, ragged, lacking cohesion and precision. That was a pity, but even more pitiable was that the conductor could have done much more with the movement, musically. This has to be counted a disappointment.

The Pathétique includes one of the great false endings in music (symphonic branch): The end of the third movement, this march, seems the end of the work, and the audience always applauds, like mad. Temirkanov did something interesting: He began the Finale right in the teeth of that applause, not waiting for it to subside, but forcing it to subside, fairly quickly. The next day, I put on a George Szell recording, from the 1960s. He let the Blossom Festival audience applaud and applaud. From the sound of it, he could have turned around and bowed, or let the orchestra stand. It went on that long. But Temirkanov had a good idea—and he conducted the Finale compellingly. It was a little coarse, a little crude, but it also did its deathly job.

Surely, Temirkanov would offer an encore, and it would almost certainly be something fleet (following that slow, numbing finale). The "Trepak" from *The Nutcracker*? No—something from England, the Nimrod Variation, out of Elgar's *Enigma Variations*. Marvelously slow, and stately, and moving. I dare say, as the "Sugar Plum Fairy" was the

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worst playing of the first night, the Nimrod was the best playing of the third. Would something fast and showy follow it? No—Temirkanov led his players off the stage, having worked his peculiar magic again.

A few years ago, I was in conversation with a composer acquaintance of mine. He writes in esoteric languages, this composer, but he is utterly free of political (or artistic) correctness, and he is disdainful of much contemporary music. You can talk turkey with him. I said to him, "I'm always searching for composers to admire—contemporary composers. Tell me, who's good? Who stands out?" And he answered, quick as a flash, "Charles Wuorinen." He didn't name anyone else. Wuorinen, he said, is a genius, absolutely off the charts. I had never loved Wuorinen's music, although I could see that it was exceptionally intelligent, but I said that I would listen with extra care.

One certainly had a chance at City Opera. The company premiered Wuorinen's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, an opera based on the "fantasy novel" of Salman Rushdie. Given that this is, in part, a children's opera, you might have thought that Wuorinen would loosen up a little—that he would relax his fearsome intellectuality and modernism. But, his hardcore fans will be happy to hear, he was "uncompromising." The score is Wuorinenesque, through and through.

Yet there is much suggestion of fantasy. You can hear some childlike simplicity within the composer's complicatedness, and some whimsy. I thought I heard a hint of the "Habañera" when seduction was afoot, and, later, a hint of "The Ride of the Valkyries." Wuorinen undoubtedly refers to the blues, when a singer actually sings about the blues. But in general, the score is unrelenting and, in my judgment, unvaried, or insufficiently varied.

The story is one that Rushdie wrote for his son (who is meant to be Haroun, the hero). He wished to explain to the boy a) the mullahs' *fatwa* and b) the collapse of the Rushdie marriage. There is much human feeling within this "magical tale for children and adults that is also a serious parable of free speech," as the PR materials say. It includes what must be one of the best depictions of writer's block in art. And the child of the parted parents wonders what he has done to cause the world to buckle.

So too, the libretto is a delight, fashioned by the poet James Fenton, who has given us a banquet of language—of rhythm, of wit, of wordplay. Virtually every sentence is interesting. One stayed riveted to the surtitles (which is no disparagement of the singers' enunciation).

City Opera delivered a winning production, directed by Mark Lamos, and wonderfully costumed by Candice Donnelly. The cast handled a difficult score with aplomb, and George Manahan, the conductor, knew his business. We even got a happy ending: The writer's pen is restored, the family is reunited, the bad guys are vanquished—hurray!

And yet, it would have been nice to whistle or hum something afterward. Does such an observation make one a Neanderthal? Maybe so. I trust that Charles Wuorinen is a genius, because people I respect tell me he is, and because his scores scream Major Brain. But genius is not always enough.

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The media

Cutting moral corners

by James Bowman

Last month I wrote in this space about the "Two Nations" contained within America's borders—not the rich and poor nations of John Edwards's anachronistic fancy, but the clever and the stupid, the complicated and the simple, the sophisticated and the boorish nations symbolized for many in the now ubiquitous red and blue map of the election results. Of course, no one supposes that there are not clever, complicated, and sophisticated people voting for Kerry in the red states and stupid, simple, and boorish people voting for Bush in the blue states, but bright Kerry supporters versus dim Bush supporters was the accepted model wherever you looked in the media, many of whose sour post-election commentaries were based on the assumption that the blue states had for some reason been blessed with majorities of bright people while the red states were correspondingly cursed with majorities of thickoes. More than one liberal commentator echoed Carole Simpson, the former anchor of ABC's *World News Tonight*, in noticing that the thirty-one red states included the thirteen that made up the old Confederacy at the time of the Civil War and put the difference between red and blue down to the legacy of slavery. Or slave-owning.

But wait a minute. Isn't there something wrong with the whole idea of statewide majorities of smart people? Doubtless there are majorities of bright people at places like the Microsoft campus in Redmond, Washington or Harvard University or at 229 West 43rd Street in Manhattan and precincts adjacent thereunto, but how can the entire states of California or Illinois or Pennsylvania (just barely) be majority bright? Doesn't that work a bit like Garrison Keillor's Lake Wobegon, Minnesota, where all the children are above average? Even in Massachusetts, intelligence must be just a bit rarer a quality than that. The wonder, then, isn't that the bright people's party didn't get 51 percent of the vote; the wonder is that it got as much as 48 percent. Kerry voters got a big kick out of the headline in the *Daily Mirror* of London: "How can 59,054,087 people be so DUMB?" But really, speaking as one of the dumb majority, I find there's no mystery about it. Most people *are* pretty dumb, at least by the standards of John Kerry and many of his most vocal supporters who manned, I think even they would have to admit, the commanding heights of the culture. Much more mystifying, I would have thought, is the question: "How can 55,532,981 people be so SMART?"

Except that I think I've figured out the answer. It is, as I suggested last month, that the Kerry voters weren't necessarily all *that* brainy. For it wasn't being smart that made people vote for Kerry; it was voting for Kerry that made people smart. It's simple, really. The Democrats are by now well-established as the political home of clever and sophisticated people. Not only famous

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geniuses like Philip Roth and Simon Schama and Madonna but most non-famous college professors and scientists, writers and artists, actors and musicians, journalists and gay people. Under those circumstances, what better way for someone to demonstrate his own intelligence and sophistication, especially if he is the tiniest bit insecure about them, than by associating himself with all those social and intellectual luminaries—among which, as the *Mirror* reminded us, we have to include a large majority of the frightfully clever British—by voting for their political party? You could call it the Mensa tendency in American politics, except that to get the bragging rights of your gray matter by joining Mensa you have to pass a test, while demonstrating socially creditable political smarts only requires you to fill in your electronic ballot form correctly—which, notwithstanding post-election conspiracy theories, I stubbornly persist in believing nearly everyone did—and perhaps put a "Kerry/Edwards" bumper sticker on straight.

I think it was Charles Murray and the late Richard Herrnstein in *The Bell Curve* (1994) who first identified "the cognitive élite" as a new social class poised to supersede declining ones based on wealth or region, race or religion, but their insight was lost in all the fuss about race and the heritability of IQ. We should have seen then that among the political consequences of the growth of a self-identified élite based on intelligence and education would be the increasingly vitriolic hatred for someone like President Bush—a Yale and Harvard man who is a kind of class traitor for courting the "some college" and lower social orders that still predominate in the red states. In America, many things may qualify one for membership in the cognitive élite, including university attended, number of years there completed, number and level of degrees earned, books, newspapers, or magazines read (*The New York Times* and *The Nation* are automatic qualifiers), films or TV shows watched ("The West Wing" or "Sex and the City" will do it, but no "reality" series screened to date), radio broadcasts listened to (NPR is always a safe bet) or art reproductions on your walls (Andy Warhol or Francis Bacon, yes, Leonardo or Botticelli, no, and nothing before Matisse unless it's an ironic icon). But in lieu of any or all of the above, a vote for John Kerry in November was enough to put you in.

None of this is obscure knowledge. "Every liberal," says Paul Begala, late of the Clinton administration and now of CNN's "Crossfire," imagines that he is "intellectually superior to conservatives." And by the same token, "Every conservative I know wants to think of himself as morally superior." This is absolutely spot-on except for the bit about conservatives, certainly if it is meant to imply a contrast with Kerry voters. It wasn't a conservative who wrote, as Peter Beinart did in *The New Republic*, that "honest conservatives, even those who admire Bush, know he didn't earn a second term." As the editor of a magazine which has been monotonously proclaiming the President's dishonesty since well before 9/11, he must have come by degrees to think it no great leap from that assumption to assuming all the President's supporters were as mendacious as he. How can 59,054,087 people be so dishonest? Later Beinart apologized, but, like Kerry apologizing for accusations of war crimes against his once and future "band of brothers," he made it sound as if he had only been guilty of a poor choice of words. And Beinart's insult was one of the milder remarks from bitter Kerry partisans who were given access to the public prints in the weeks after the election. The novelist Jane Smiley, writing in *Slate*, insisted that Bush and Cheney, if not every one of their supporters (who are merely ignorant) "know no boundaries or rules. They are predatory and resentful, amoral, avaricious and arrogant." Garry Wills in *The New York Times* proclaimed the end of the Enlightenment, no less, and found little or nothing to choose between al Qaeda's *jihad* and George Bush's.

No self-conceit of moral superiority there

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then! But the idea of conservatives as being more than commonly self-righteous, just like the idea of liberals as being more than commonly intelligent, has now become an article of faith for the media consensus and the reason for all those sober electoral post-mortems announcing the importance of "moral values" in explaining the results. I myself thought this analysis mistaken. "Moral values" as cited by people in exit poll interviews amounted to a "Don't Know" response for anyone who had a vague feeling that one side was preferable to the other but couldn't tell you why exactly, and it's not surprising to me that Bush should have more of these voters, given the rhetorical differences between the two campaigns. Kerry, in other words, always had a great many reasons to offer why people should vote for him, while Bush had only one or two on the other side. If you cared more about "leadership" or resolution than you did about taxes and health care and all the rest of the usual campaign "issues," what other box would you check than the one marked "Moral values"? The idea of such values as a new and potent force was also counterintuitive. The electoral map in 2004 looked almost exactly like the one in 2000, except that the red tide lapped just a little higher on the blue beach, taking in New Mexico and Iowa which it just missed last time and only losing New Hampshire, which it just won last time.

"Moral values" may not have decided the election, but they did create the passion with which it was fought and the bitterness of the aftermath. Anyone attending to the electoral dialogue in the weeks and months running up to the election could not have been unaware that all, or nearly all, the moral fervor was on the Kerry side, which numbered among its more fervent adherents the thoughtful graffitist who inscribed on a public refuse bin near my office the elegant equation: "Bush = Hitler." This was not, by the way, the first time I had been involuntarily made aware of this sentiment's being abroad, but I don't remember a single conservative writing Kerry = Hitler. Or even Kerry = Stalin, Mao, Pol Pot—take your choice. Even among the more rhetorically restrained Democratic faction, charges of "bigotry" against Bush/Cheney were almost routine. Those who liked Bush did not, for the most part, hate Kerry or consider him a wicked or immoral man, whereas large numbers of those who liked Kerry did have just such thoughts and feelings about the President. I suppose it would have been too much to expect that those who were the victims of it should have been able to spot the irony that the party of "nuance," of insisting that all was not black and white, professed to find it all black and white when it came to the Bush administration. At least Bush's with-us-or-against-us moment was *vis à vis* an evil dictator; theirs was against their own government.

So if the side for which moral values mattered most actually lost, then wasn't it the case that the *vox populi* had come down *against* a greater moralization of politics? Once again the media consensus had got things exactly wrong. But then the whole point of the media consensus is to allow journalists to be wrong, even absurd, with impunity. Without the license it affords for rhetorical recklessness, there could be no Maureen Dowd to write that Bush had been "re-elected by dividing the country along fault lines of fear, intolerance, ignorance and religious rule." Her scrambled metaphor, if it meant anything at all, required us to believe that such "fault lines" did not already amount to divisions and would have troubled no one if Bush, here possibly imagined as an elemental force wielding the power of an earthquake, had not come along to knock off onto his side of the fault line or lines all the fearful, intolerant, ignorant, and theocratically minded to whom otherwise such regrettable mental habits would never have occurred. But here she has also the advantage of appeal to a further article of the post-election media consensus, namely that the nation is "deeply divided"—whether Bush and his

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henchmen actually created the division or only exploited it—which is at least equally dubious. Such division as existed was mainly a phenomenon of the media culture which found itself unexpectedly divided from the majority.

As even the *Washington Post* editorialized, "although citizens are not deeply divided, the minority that dominates the political arena is genuinely polarized." This, at least, is beyond question and something the *Post* attributes to, among other things, the fact that "television, once a force for unifying moderation when three networks ruled the air, is now the province of noisy cable shows that thrive by staging furious arguments." Now it seems to me just a bit of an exaggeration to say that a few shows with miniscule audiences like CNN's "Crossfire" or MSNBC's "Hardball with Chris Matthews" have come to amount to the whole "province" of television, but this *faux* insight is something that looks like becoming yet another bit of the media consensus. That's why Jon Stewart, the comic newsreader of Comedy Central's "Daily Show," went on "Crossfire" before the election to tell Mr. Begala and his co-host, Tucker Carlson, that their noisy partisanship was "hurting America." It was not coincidental that he, like the *Washington Post*, had announced that he was supporting Kerry. For what he had in mind as the media ideal was, I suspect, also what the *Post* meant by that "force for unifying moderation" in the old network news shows. "Moderation" here means, as it so often does in media-talk, "the political tendency that I favor."

In any case, even the *Washington Post* must have had a hard time clinging to the polite fiction of the networks' moderate and unifying qualities in the aftermath of this election campaign, which saw an unprecedented amount of partisanship on the part of media outlets who were once so jealous of their reputation for "objectivity." CBS was particularly at fault—blatantly anti-Bush in broadcasting scurrilous charges against the President's record in the Air National Guard which were based on forged documents and pushing hard, along with *The New York Times*, at an almost equally bogus story in the closing week of the campaign about some missing munitions in Iraq that it obviously hoped would amount to an "October Surprise." In the latter case, CBS freely admitted that it had intended to hold the story until only two days before the election and was only forced to let it out early when the *Times* published it in order to forestall a leak. But when the story was published, no one knew when the explosives stored at Al Qaqaa had gone missing, or whether they had been moved by Saddam Hussein before the war or blown up by American troops during it. And if there were any negligence, it would have been as a result of an operational decision and not one that anyone could reasonably have expected to have crossed the desk of even a low-level bureaucrat in Washington, let alone the President's.

But desperation on the part of Kerry partisans to find anything that could be made to look like a scandal was enthusiastically taken up by the press, which laid particular stress on the charge that the missing explosives "could be used to detonate a nuclear device." This was like saying, if a box of screws had gone missing, that the screws could have been used to construct a nuclear device. Well yes, they could, but you would have needed quite a lot of other things as well—a lot of other things that the media itself has been several times at the point of apoplexy over the past year and a half with the effort to emphasize that the Iraqis didn't have. It's true that such manufactured scandals were only one manifestation of the fact that that is the way the media play the political game, but there were no such scandals, and no attempts at scandal in the case of Senator Kerry. On the contrary, when the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth attempted to drum one up, no one in the media paid the slightest attention until Kerry was stung into replying. And then, at least in the case of *The New York Times*, it was only to investigate whether the

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Veterans had ties to the Bush campaign. Through all this the media naturally continued to deny that there had been any lapse from "objectivity," often in terms reminiscent of Dan Rather's comic dismissal of those who had called attention to his journalistic lapse in making a report based on forged documents as "partisans."

The pretense of the media's non-partisanship has been looking more and more hollow for years, perhaps because of the influence of the more open partisanship of the cable shows mentioned by the *Post* editorial. But it finally collapsed completely under pressure of the furious hatred for President Bush felt by the smart people of the media culture. It wasn't just the call made by Kerry's campaign manager, Mary Beth Cahill, to NBC on election night to urge them to unaward Ohio to Bush after the network's psephological wizards had determined that he must have won the state. Karl Rove also called Fox to urge them to call New Mexico for Bush. Neither call achieved its intended result, but they were significant in terms of where each side thought it might have been able to exercise its influence.

Rove could hardly have hoped to be listened to anywhere but Fox, but NBC was the outlier among the other networks, which had all been as cautious with their late night projections as the Kerry people could have desired. We know that the Democrats were as persuaded as the Republicans that the vast majority of the media were on their, the Democrats', side because of the e-mailing campaign to major and reliably liberal media outlets co-ordinated by the DNC. A well-known on-air figure at one of the networks which might have been considered among the more friendly to Kerry told me that he had received hundreds of e-mails a day from Kerry supporters throughout the campaign, trying to steer his coverage of it in their direction. He had heard from other journalists that the same thing was happening elsewhere and didn't see how his or anyone else's coverage could have remained quite unaffected by the fact that so many steely and unforgiving partisan eyes were constantly upon him.

Evan Thomas of *Newsweek*—no conservative he—notoriously predicted early in the campaign that the media's pro-Kerry bias would be worth five percentage points to the Democrat in the final tally. The media's partisanship even became a joke to the media itself. "Television did a good job Tuesday night, I thought," said Andy Rooney on *60 Minutes*, the show that had first broadcast the story based on forged documents. "I know a lot of you believe that most people in the news business are liberal. Let me tell you, I know a lot of them, and they were almost evenly divided this time. Half of them liked Senator Kerry; the other half hated President Bush." Like Democratic jokes about the dead voting, or the living "early and often," in Chicago and elsewhere where remnants of the old Democratic machine politics survive, this kind of flippancy amounts to a nod and a wink to the rest of us who are expected to treat such trifling improprieties as their entitlement—perhaps for being better *and* smarter than the other side. For in fact there is no dichotomy between the moral and the intellectual of the type suggested by Paul Begala. Those who think of themselves as intellectually superior also think of themselves as morally superior—as we saw most vividly in the reaction of so many of the smart people's faction to their unexpected defeat. And there's nothing like being persuaded of one's general and massive moral superiority to reconcile one's conscience to cutting a few moral corners here and there or giving vent, now and then, to a little "hatred" and "bigotry" of one's own.

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Verse chronicle

One if by land

by William Logan

Gary Snyder was a marquee poet in the Sixties, when his eco-Buddhist paeans were read in every commune from Maine to Baja. Decades later, their misty imagism, indebted equally to Ezra Pound and Japanese haiku, seems cloying and sentimental, dependent on the Zeitgeist for its effect. The poetry of the day is passé when the day is past, its beauties no longer beautiful; and even a style stronger than Snyder's may sooner or later seem obsolete, like the picket fences of Augustan couplets when the hurricane of romanticism swept through.

The poems of *Danger on Peaks*, Snyder's first volume of new verse in twenty years, are a throwback to those heady days of Haight-Ashbury, free love, and Volkswagen buses, though what used to be poems are now mostly half-hearted diary jottings followed by a snippet of verse.[1] Snyder has been influenced by the travel journals of Bashō (the style of poetry mixed with prose is called *haibun*), but if prose is to have the force of poetry it can't be as badly written as poetry.

In 1945, Snyder climbed Mount St. Helens and on coming down learned that the United States had dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The awful contrast—the tranquil splendor of the mountain, the hideous deaths of innocent civilians—brutally affected him:

> Horrified, blaming scientists and politicians and the governments of the world, I swore a vow to myself, something like, "By the purity and beauty and permanence of Mt. St. Helens, I will fight against this cruel destructive power and those who would seek to use it, for all my life."

It's easy to forgive the pretensions and naïveté of the young man, harder to bear the self-satisfied maunderings of the older one. Thirty-five years later, the mountain erupted with far more violence than a mere A-bomb—and, reader, guess what! The explosion reminded him of Hiroshima! The romantic sublime ended not with a whimper but a bang. As Snyder says elsewhere, in an argot that promises the Sixties never died, "West Coast snowpeaks are too much!"

Snyder has long been a guru for the ecology movement, his poems reflecting the woodsy self-reliance, the search for knowledge, that forms an appealing part of his character. He studs his poems with a geologist's lingua franca—*doab, schrund, tephra, lahar, cirque*—and has a cheerful disregard for the small formalities of English. Fortunately most of his wilder notions were corrected, between the proofs and the finished book, by some cigar-chewing copy-editor of the old school, one who still cares for the distinctions between "lay" and "lie" and has no love for idiosyncrasies like "fistfull" and "millenia" (though he missed

1 *Danger on Peaks*, by Gary Snyder; Shoemaker & Hoard, 112 pages, $22.

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the animal whose neck had been "ate out"). *Oh, man!* you can hear Snyder say, *don't be so uptight!* None of this would matter, if the poems weren't like the disconnected thoughts of a man trying to make verse with magnets on a refrigerator door:

> white-hot crumbling boulders lift and fly in a
> burning sky-river wind of
> searing lava droplet hail,
> huge icebergs in the storm, exploding mud,
> shoots out flat and rolls a swelling billowing
> cloud of rock bits,
> crystals, pumice, shards of glass
> dead ahead blasting away—
> a heavenly host of tall trees goes flat down
> lightning dances through the giant smoke

That's the volcano erupting, and it looks as if it erupted in Miss Hathaway's eleventh-grade English class. The words couldn't have been thrown onto the page with more abandon if the volcano had hurled them there.

The reader is left with desultory scraps from journals, even when Snyder's not writing journals ("I'm 63 now & on my way to pick up my ten-year-old stepdaughter and drive the car pool./ I just finished a five-page letter to the County Supervisors"). At one point he tells us, in case we're interested, that he's going to try an ostrich burger, and then that he's busy eating it—"The Ostrich burger is delicious. It's big, with lots of lettuce, onions, hot mustard . . ." *Stop!* you want to say. The poor poems, when they can get a word in edgewise, would embarrass even a county supervisor:

> Earth spirit please don't mind
> If cement trucks grind
> And plant spirits wait a while
> Please come back and smile.

This compassionate, benign, grizzled patriarch, supporter of just causes, sensitive to the land around him, a Buddhist (more or less), is the sort of man you'd call if you had to overhaul a tractor engine or drag a cow out of the mud (he's also the sort who asks a mountain for help and thinks it answers). If you want someone to write you a decent poem, however, you'd better look elsewhere. A lot of readers buy books because they agree with the author's character or politics and like to be thought of as people who read such things—perhaps they don't mind too much when the writing has grown slovenly (a dozen or more poems end with a cute three-word tag like *twitchy pine boughs* or *velvet-dusty pigs*). Poems like Gary Snyder's should come as a free gift in a box of granola.

To read a lot of criticism these days, you'd think the most important thing about a poet was his ethnic identity or sexual proclivities and the most important thing about a poem was *its* ethnic identity or sexual proclivities. This is a recent notion, as well as a bad one; but it isn't bad because who our ancestors were and whom we sleep with have no consequences. (To treat people badly because their skin has a different hue, or because they don't share our lusts, or because they're lame, halt, or blind, is a despicable way of behaving. It is also impolite.) The notion is bad because poems of identity offer only a narcissistic, needle's-eye view of the world (when poetry is used merely to build self-esteem, it's time to make Larkin required reading). Thank goodness Homer didn't go on about being blind and Ionian.

Even so, Rita Dove's *American Smooth* reminds us how important it is never to ignore the sins of the past, or to pretend the past hasn't afflicted the present.[2] Dove has a natural interest in the history of blacks in America, a history she has labored into verse. It's curious that it so often *seems* a labor. A long section of poems consists of accounts by black soldiers of their service in World War I. Unwelcome in the segregated American forces, they served overseas because France asked for them, and there fought furiously and bravely. One poem,

2 *American Smooth*, by Rita Dove; Norton, 143 pages, $22.95.

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however, consists of eleven pages of diary entries about life aboard a troop ship; and for tedium it rivals building the Eiffel Tower out of matchsticks. Worse, the poet's note to the sequence bristles with resentment.

Blacks in America have a lot to be resentful about, but I'm not sure the poetry of resentment is the best way to deal with it. The scene is a country club, and some thoughtless white woman has just complimented Dove on her dress by telling her she looks "good in every color."

> For once I was not the only
> black person in the room
> (two others, both male).
> I thought of Sambo; I thought
> a few other things, too,
> unmentionable here. Don't
> get me wrong: I've always loved
> my skin, the way it glows against
> citron and fuchsia, the difficult hues,
> but the difference I cause
> whenever I walk into a polite space
> is why I prefer grand entrances.

"Don't/ get me wrong" suggests the poet worries that we might think, for a moment, she's ashamed of being black. Something hidden and mortifying is touched here, but like those "unmentionable" things it's skated over in favor of a swish of indignation and a self-satisfied nod of triumph.

Very occasionally you get a hint of the angers and sharp-toothed motives that swim like great predators beneath the tranquil waters of these poems. Dove instead tries to fob the reader off with sentimental rubbish—say, about the heart, "I can't wear it/ on my sleeve,/ or tell you from/ the bottom of it/ how I feel." You read that and you know the price of saccharin just fell through the floor. Or perhaps you'd prefer some love couplets, tossed off seemingly on the spur of the moment:

> I could choose any hero, any cause or age
> And, sure as shooting arrows to the heart,
> Astride a dappled mare, legs braced as far apart
> As standing in silver stirrups will allow—
> There you'll be, with furrowed brow
> And chain mail glinting, to set me free:
> One eye smiling, the other firm upon the
> enemy.

It's like something scribbled on the table of a medieval-theme restaurant, where men in armor are bashing away at each other a few feet from your table. The inflated language, the sloppy pun on "sure as shooting," the dappled mare, and that ridiculous smiling eye! Sir Walter Scott can take the blame for the props, but the ugly composition (almost every line desperate for its rhyme) and ungainly meter (now too many iambs, now too few) are all Dove's own.

No matter what subject she touches, it turns to lead in her hands: Salomé, Hattie McDaniel, chocolate, Adam and Eve, a drive-in, dance lessons. Dove rarely does more than what's expected (she's steady as a gyroscope and twice as dull), and increasingly writes as if lecturing a class of third-graders:

> Don't
> hold your breath. Don't hold
> anything, just stop breathing.
> Level the scene with your eyes. Listen.
> Soft, now: squeeze.

Is that another love poem? Yes, about owning a hand gun (Glock or Keltec seems to be the choice). If this conflicts with her liberal values, she makes no mention of it—then she writes in the voice of a bullet ("o aperture o light let me off/ go off straight is my verb straight/ my glory road." *My glory road*!).

In her best work the former poet laureate catches some residue of black experience, but she scarcely realizes that in herself lie the tensions that reveal the long sorrows of race in this country. Even when a poet doesn't trade in confessions, the reader wants some sense of the private world behind the mask. Dove's poems have become so superficial, so lacking in felt life, they might have been ordered from some poem sweat-shop in a third-world country. After a series of banal

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commissioned poems, written to be carved on the backs of twelve marble chairs in a federal courthouse (Dove's poetry has invited more commissions than a corrupt police department), you wonder if this is what the end of her poetry will be: all public spirit and no private life.

The ancient heroes who slashed and burned their way into epic were the bully boys of their time, tearaways, real roarers, greedy and careless, their deeds so exaggerated they'd overwhelm any kernel of fact, if we didn't have historical examples like Alexander and Caesar to remind us how much a man might accomplish without fiction. If Achilles and Odysseus, Beowulf and Gilgamesh never existed, they were lucky in their poets. Derrek Hines's knockabout version of *Gilgamesh* shakes some of the dust off a poem too often translated with white gloves (a 1946 version modestly rendered the dirty bits in Latin), as if simply by being the oldest of western epics it must be treated with the courtesy due some doddering relict wearing the family jewels.[3] This is disastrous for that venerable antique, which can be made to sound more like a monumental inscription than a poem.

If there was once a king named Gilgamesh, he ruled the Sumerian city-state of Uruk nearly five thousand years ago (from Uruk the name Iraq is derived) and was worshiped as a god longer in his culture than the Holy Trinity has been in ours. The tales that accrued around him have come down to us in Sumerian, Akkadian, Babylonian, Elamite, Hurrian, and Hittite, the tablets that bore them salvaged from the great rubbish dumps of ruined cities across the Middle East. The standard text consists of eleven tablets (with a twelfth misfit), all of them damaged or fragmentary, in a version edited in Nineveh in the seventh century B.C. Anyone attempting to bring this old yarn to life has a lot of broken crockery on his hands.

3 *Gilgamesh*, by Derrek Hines; Anchor Books, 66 pages, $9.95 (paper).

Hines has thrown the cuneiform back onto the scrap heap and started fresh:

> Here is Gilgàmesh, king of Uruk:
> two-thirds divine, a mummy's boy,
> zeppelin ego, cock like a trip-hammer,
> and solid chrome, no-prisoners arrogance.
>
> Pulls women like beer rings.
> Grunts when puzzled.
> A bully. A jock. Perfecto. But in love?—
> a moon-calf, and worse, thoughtful.

Not all readers will care for a translation that takes such liberties ("two-thirds divine" violates any sensible genetics; but that's the ancient poet's fault, not the translator's), though Hines is hardly the first poet to retailor the past to the fashions of the present. Dryden long ago saw the value of what he called "imitation," where the translator aims, not for the vanities of fidelity, but for the violations of license. Hines's *Gilgamesh* is only the latest in a long line that descends from Samuel Johnson's "Vanity of Human Wishes" and Pound's translations of "The Seafarer" and the Chinese poems in *Cathay* down to Robert Lowell's infamous *Imitations* and Christopher Logue's peculiar and muscular versions of the *Iliad*, which have carried the tradition farther than Dryden might have imagined.

Since Hines has learned many of Logue's virtues and a few of his vices (no one would want Logue's mannerisms to become the default style for the classics), you have to be prepared for a jazzy tone and language that careers slangily across the centuries. Here one of Gilgamesh's soldiers lodges a complaint during the campaign to cut down the cedars of Lebanon:

> So, we figured, no snatch for medals in this
> caper.
>
> A month now, desert-yomping in full kit.
> Scorpion wind in the face, crotch rot, boils.
> Not helped by our great King, who wakes
> each morning
> from dreams like multiple car crashes.

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Yomping in full kit, for British squaddies, is what GI's call *humping full packs*. (American readers may find a few references bewildering, such as the "toff's precious Hooray Henrys"—this may be a good thing in a translation from Babylonian). The language, though often hopped-up and bug-eyed, carries some of the strangeness of the shattered text.

At the outset Gilgamesh is a royal monster who takes full advantage of *jus primae noctae* (the right to sleep with a man's bride on his wedding night). The gods answer his subjects' pleas by creating a musclebound wild man, Enkidu, who is soon civilized by the sexual gymnastics of a temple prostitute—this suggests the Fall might have been more interesting if caused not by food but by sex (the original sometimes reads like Akkadian porn). Enkidu fights the king to a draw and they become great friends; but, after they kill the wizard Humbaba, who guards the famous cedars, and then for good measure the sacred bull of heaven (the heroes are like two WWF wrestlers on a tear), the gods decide that as punishment Enkidu must die. Afterward, in mourning, and in terror at his own mortality, Gilgamesh travels to the underworld; but the herb of youth he brings back is stolen by a snake. (The relations between *Gilgamesh* and Old Testament myths are a minor scholarly industry.) He must then prepare for his own death.

Hines will do most anything to get the reader's attention (though not as much as Logue, who introduced helicopters to the weaponry available in the *Iliad*). Point of view descends from on high to the common grunt; and the language has, not the priestly rhythms of a poem once sung to a lyre or intoned like prayer, not the panoply of tedious repetitions, but the density of modern poetry.

> Euphrates' airy, fish-woven halls,
> a sleep of reed beds, the éclat of date palms,
> wind-glossed corn. And in the distance
>
> desert—the sun's loose gunpowder.
>
> Green rolls up
> and rasps along it like a tongue
> wetting sandpaper.

Hines makes vivid what might have died as a dusty footnote: his temple prostitutes strut like fashion models, "striding down/ the cat-walk of Uruk's high street/ in the designer gowns of Paradise." The night is "soft-mouthed as a gundog," the sound of ghosts drinking blood like that of "surgical tape ripped off skin," and a goddess "pulses into focus before him:// breasts taut as airships/ from hangars nosing." The mannerisms are the manner here, but line by line you have a poem hauled fresh from the sands again.

Such radical revision loses much the old epic had to offer; yet even the King James Bible, with its learned committee of translators, had to make occasional accommodation to its own world, if it was not to lose the meat with the method. Indeed, it would have been interesting to see what the committee would have done with Gilgamesh, written in the same broad culture that produced the Old Testament and scattered with parallels to the Bible—including its own version of the Flood, which Hines unfortunately omits.

It's disconcerting to have a Gilgamesh who plays backgammon and drinks ouzo, who dresses in silks and apparently suffers the attentions of paparazzi; but then it is disconcerting to read in a history of Babylon that in 600 B.C. Nebuchadnezzar asphalted the streets. The past is stranger than we imagine; and, if a translation like *Gilgamesh* does not get us closer to the past as it was, it gets us closer to something almost more important—the past that must exist continually in the present. If you want Juvenal, you don't go to Johnson—you go to Johnson to see what the eighteenth century made of the second, what post-Augustan London thought of post-Augustan Rome. At best you find that the modern teases out some nuance asleep in the old lines, like Hines's evocation of Gilgamesh waiting for death, "swallowing this fist of

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fear in a quayside café/ beside these old men/ like rows of buttons waiting to be undone." When men try to update Shakespeare, what they usually get is Bowdler; when they try to modernize Homer's Achilles, they get Brad Pitt (Logue's *Iliad*, though scrappy and intermittently awful, is a fine exception). We are fortunate to have a new version of *Gilgamesh* that makes the ancient world another world altogether.

By contrast, Stephen Mitchell's earnest, forelock-tugging new version of the epic is homely as a mud fence, which shows how fidelity can make this gaudy and muscle-bound artifact merely workmanlike.[4] (For a very different ranking of these books, see the intelligent review by John J. Miller in the October issue of this journal.) Mitchell's translation, which has a longwinded high-schooler's introduction, drags a heavy sledge of notes; and his attempt at four-stress accentual meter is a foot-dragging failure. If you want the incidents Hines cuts in his fast-forward version, and some of the nuances (or even contradictions) of behavior, you have to read Mitchell: in the original, Gilgamesh beats Enkidu in their wrestling match and no army accompanies them in the attack on Humbaba, who is a terrible monster, not some distant ancestor of the Wizard of Oz. The beautiful Babylonian tale of the Flood is here, as is the full story of Gilgamesh in the underworld, which he reaches by ship, using three hundred punting poles! Though Mitchell's is more cheerfully vulgar than previous versions (other than those in Latin), he has no particular gift for language and his *Gilgamesh* might have been better translated by a team of UN bureaucrats.

Derek Walcott's *The Prodigal* is a valedictory book, the long poem of a man who has seen the world and been left with a handful of airline ticket stubs.[5] For half a century Walcott has been one of the great stylists of English verse, in an age when style has been more and more a badge of shame, when sentences grow ever shorter and sins ever longer. The poem begins as a whistle-stop tour of cities and countries: dashing through Pennsylvania, New York, and Boston, flitting now to Zermatt and Geneva, now Florence and Abruzzi, Pescara and Genoa, then Madrid, Germany, New York again, Colombia, all before the poem is half spent—it's hard to keep track without an itinerary and a GPS device. This is a book of transit, of voluntary exile, of almost pathological restlessness, the travel conducted with a bored melancholy that infuses even the poet's wandering eye, for this is also a book of erotic liaisons, sly glances, closet desires—in short, of wanting to screw anything that walks. As a man ages, his romantic opportunities shorten with his odds, and Walcott seems at times a character in James, waiting and waiting for his moment, until he realizes the moment has passed.

The prodigal son "wasted his substance with riotous living," according to St. Luke, but at last returned home to be fêted as someone dead returned to life. The divided racial heritage of St. Lucia, Walcott's home island, shadows his uncomfortable and wary relation to the traditions of English poetry. To what extent, his poems have asked, is a man born in the colonies a traitor if he adopts the language and literature of his masters? Walcott has instead become a "vague pilgrim," never at home even at home, a man for whom all frontiers become one.

The poet has never flinched from what he saw as his duty to the tradition; and reading his long, elaborate sentences is like watching a master goldsmith fashion a coronation crown and decorate it with rubies, diamonds, and amethysts in bold array.

> Chasms and fissures of the vertiginous Alps
> through the plane window, meadows of snow
> on powdery precipices, the cantons of cumuli

4 *Gilgamesh: A New English Version*, by Stephen Mitchell; Free Press, 292 pages, $24.

5 *The Prodigal*, by Derek Walcott; Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 105 pages, $20.

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grumbling or closing, gasping falls of light
a steady and serene white-knuckled horror
of speckled white serrations, inconceivable
in repetition, spumy avalanches
of forgetting cloud, in the wrong heaven . . .

Cantons of cumuli! The passage is lovely, but the sentence is scarcely begun. On and on it goes—in this new book Walcott does what he has always done, except now he overdoes it with an old man's desperation. The figures are as boldly formed as ever; but when reading them you think, "Didn't the bird *arrow* by a few pages ago? Hasn't Walcott often described the ocean as like *tinfoil,* or glistening water like minted *coins*? Haven't the island days often been compared to hot *zinc*?" The sentences seem endless; and, if the reader on occasion gets tangled in their complex syntax, so at times does the writer.

This long poem reads like a pendant to Walcott's precocious verse autobiography, *Another Life* (1973), published when he was just forty-three. (*The Prodigal* is what the poet of Dove Cottage might have called *The Postlude.*) Walcott is remarkably honest about his priapic instincts (he even manages to give a woman soldier his bedroom gaze), though he succeeds only in making himself ridiculous:

Past the stalagmites of the Duomo
the peaches of summer are bouncing
on the grids of the Milanese sidewalks
in halters cut close to the coccyx.
I look and no longer sigh for the impossible,
panting over a cupidinous coffee
like an old setter that has stopped chasing
pigeons.

The *peaches of summer*? Oh, you think, he means *breasts.* But what is that setter doing panting over a *cupidinous coffee*? Too often, as the cities come and go like buses, the poem lounges there, drowsy and fractured, the buttery lines of Walcott's descriptions so rich they're worse than a diet of chocolate icing. Besieged by the deaths of strangers, of friends, of family, the poet already feels like a "name cut on a wall that soon/ from the grime of indifference became indecipherable." This has the doomed grace of lines by Keats; but then it's back to the flood of purple passages, the gouts of adjectives and fatty verbs, until the poem becomes a kind of numbing mad mutter. There was a time when Walcott gave his style point, a time when his poems didn't just finger his memories like fragments of the True Cross.

The death of Czeslaw Milosz a few months ago at the age of ninety-three has deprived us of one of the most interesting exiles of the twentieth century. Born in Lithuania to a Polish family that once owned great estates, as a boy he traveled with his parents across Russia and Siberia (his father was a highway engineer for the tsar's army). After university he lived in Paris, where he came under the influence of his uncle Oscar, a French poet of an eschatological and mystical temper. (Milosz notes wryly that, when he received the Nobel, some French newspapers wrote "that it had been given to the wrong Milosz.") During World War II, the young poet served as a radio operator, after the fall of Poland living in Nazi-occupied Warsaw, where he wrote for the resistance. He later became a minor diplomat in Washington and Paris, where he sought political asylum in 1951. From 1960 he taught at Berkeley, though not until the late Sixties were translations of his poetry available in English.

Being an exile under such conditions hardly compares to the banishment of Ovid to the Black Sea; yet Milosz's poetry, darkened by war and memories of the Holocaust, more and more took on an elegiac cast, until in this book he is surrounded by throngs of ghosts, like Odysseus in the Underworld. The question that troubles him is the source of evil. As a skeptical believer, a Christian with a rational tongue (his faith tended to be sturdy but gentle, like Emily Dickinson's), he could not help echoing the Epicureans: "If God is all-powerful, he can allow all this only if he

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is not good." This made his poems a fruitless search for redemption and consolation.

The poems in *Second Space* at times seem muted by their journey from Polish.[6] For many years the poet has been fortunate to have as his translator the talented Robert Hass, whose own poetic gifts allow him to ride herd on Milosz's work without feeling it necessary to put his brand on every line. The best of the poems offer visions with a retrospective burden:

> An English horn, a drum, a viola making music
> In a house on a hill amidst forests in autumn.
> A large view from there onto bends of the river.
>
> I still want to correct this world,
> Yet I think mostly of them, and they have all
> died.
> Also about their unknown country.
> Its geography, says Swedenborg, cannot be
> transferred to maps.

Translation, if we're lucky, leads us out of the conventions and proprieties in which our own poetry is mired (poetry in another language suffers conventions, too; but at least they're not ours). A poem in translation is like a newspaper report of a ballet—the only thing lost is the dance. Even when a translation has been cast in the same form, it may have different weight or bearing—Dante's terza rima is nothing like terza rima in English. It's surprising, therefore, how much of Milosz's personality—his scratchy wit, his wry pessimism, his joviality ("I should be dead already, but there is work to do")—comes through the baffles and cofferdams of English. For the poor translator, finding the equivalents for a foreign language can be like wandering through a fabric store trying to match the pattern of the sofa Aunt Matilda re-covered in 1937.

The shorter poems here often consult, rather than confront, problems of faith and belief—they're mild-mannered, meditative poems that perhaps wish to be darker and danker. The book ends with four long poems, two so tangled in religious themes they're like cats lost in a great ball of yarn. The others cut deeper into conscience, one a portrait of Milosz's uncle, the depressive romantic who once shot himself in the heart, but survived to become a well-known French poet. Belabored with footnotes, which prove surprisingly helpful in setting the poem in history and explaining references that might otherwise be lost (opacity is rarely a virtue in translation), the poem is an homage to a great spirit, a "master of alchemy" from whom Milosz received his sense of vocation. As the younger poet counts his debts, the poem turns rather dry and Swedenborgian, echoing the only rational thing one can say about the past (as well as the only irrational thing), Goethe's words: "*Respect! Respect! Respect!*"

The final poem opens with a witty portrait of Orpheus at the gates of Hell:

> Standing on flagstones of the sidewalk at the
> entrance to Hades
> Orpheus hunched in a gust of wind
> That tore at his coat, rolled past in waves of
> fog,
> Tossed the leaves of the trees. The headlights
> of cars
> Flared and dimmed in each wave
> succeeding.

Here the problems of faith and trust that have haunted Milosz find their way to antique myth. For a man who seemed to hear footsteps behind him most of his life, there is a terrible pathos when Orpheus turns, having led Eurydice almost out of Hell, and no one is there.

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6 *Second Space*, by Czeslaw Milosz; Ecco, 102 pages, $23.95.

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Books

Barbarity without vigor

by Anthony Daniels

A civilization, or at least a way of life, collapsed around the time I was born. Unfortunately these two events, which were not causally related, occurred in the same country: Britain.

Naturally, civilizations do not collapse overnight. They decay, erode, or decompose into unrecognizability. In historical terms, however, the process can be very swift. I grew up at the very end of the era Christie Davies, a sociologist who has something arresting to say on every subject he treats, calls "Moral Britain," whose strange death he describes and tries to explain.[1]

I am uncertain whether to be grateful for having witnessed the last of Moral Britain, or to curse my fate, for the personal legacy has been ambiguous. On the one hand, it has given me an attachment to things that I believe are enriching; on the other, it has cast a pall of melancholia over my life, such that I now feel a stranger, or even an enemy, in my own land. Had I grown up just a few years later, I should not have known Britons could be other than shallow, vulgar, and egotistical. Ignorance of this might not have been bliss, exactly, but it would at least have been complacency and lack of comparison, without which true contentment is impossible.

Here, then, are some of the things that I remember at random from my childhood, that now seem as alien as anything in the farthest flung regions of the globe. The past definitely was another country, and they really did do things differently there.

Evening newspapers would be piled on an unattended stand, and anyone who wanted a copy put his money on the top of the pile and took it. It would have been a deeply shocking, almost inconceivable thing, for anyone to purloin the money, though nothing would have been easier to do.

From the earliest age, I traveled across London, still pocked with bombsites, and every evening, from the age of eight, I would take my dog out for a walk, even after dark. I was no more in danger than when I went upstairs to bed.

I went to football matches with a friend, unaccompanied by an adult, from the age of nine. The crowds were much larger in those days, because most spectators stood on terraces rather than sat. They were packed like sardines on bleak concrete steps open to the elements. But ordinary working class people would help unaccompanied children to the front of the crowd, so that they might see better, and I even heard them say that no one should swear because there were women and children present. We in Britain had heard rumors of crowd disturbances at football matches in foreign lands, of police trenches round pitches and tear gas used to control riots when the wrong team scored a goal, accounts of which we pretended to be incredulous, the very unthinkability of such

1 *The Strange Death of Moral Britain* by Christie Davies; Transaction, 264 pages, $39.95.

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conduct confirming us in our national superiority.

Gentility was not quite dead, and its badge was still eagerly worn. To transgress had connotations of moral turpitude rather than of daring aesthetic innovation. A certain formality of manner persisted; people still worried about the correct way to address a bishop; and I learned how to end letters by claiming to be someone's obedient servant. Even quite bad men raised their hats to their acquaintances, and the bowler hat was not yet an object of ridicule. As for childish mischief, ringing doorbells and running away seemed the acme of delinquent daring.

Of course, there were drawbacks. The November fogs were so thick that you couldn't see the hand in front of your face, and a man would have to walk slowly in front of a bus to guide it inch by inch through the gloom. I loved those fogs as a child, but they killed thousands of people in a horrible way, and it took my father so long to get to work that on arrival he had to come straight back. As for the food, it was truly execrable. Vegetables were treated as if they were manioc and had deadly poisons in them that could be removed only by prolonged boiling; anything with a strong flavor was regarded as morally suspect, almost an instrument of foreign subversion. Physical discomfort was not then regarded as the terrible or worst possible misfortune it was later to become, and was even considered character-building.

At a time in my life when six weeks seemed an eternity, the social world around me appeared solid, dependable, and indestructible, partly because many of the coins in circulation were still Victorian, and very occasionally one might even find a pre-Victorian penny, from the reign of William IV. (Professor Davies has interesting things to say about the demoralizing effect of inflation, for example, by rendering thrift economically disadvantageous.) In reality, though, the seemingly secure and safe social world that surrounded me was already crumbling fast from within.

Disagreement between my parents on the matter of manners reflected the social ferment beyond our household. My mother favored the classical view, my father (who was her elder by twelve years), the romantic. My mother thought that manners were a matter of discipline and could be inculcated; the heart would follow habit. My father believed that good conduct was the consequence of sincerity and a spontaneous good heart, in the absence of which nought availed. Since man was born good, conduct would be good if artificial impediments were removed. And good manners, after all, were perfectly compatible with deep wickedness, a coexistence that was dangerous insofar as the former could easily hide the latter from view.

There is no doubt that my mother was on the losing side of the argument, both sociologically and historically, though she was morally in the right. Her concept of manners was derided by my father as mere etiquette, and there was an element of truth in this. For example, my mother so successfully drummed into me the notion that a man must always be on the outer side of the sidewalk when he accompanies a woman that to this day I am tortured by something akin to guilt if I accompany a woman on the inner side, and am prepared to go through agonies to get to the other side (needless to say, no woman these days has any understanding of why I switch sides, for example, when we cross the road). Clearly, it is a matter of moral indifference on which side of the woman I accompany her, so the discomfort I feel is not really guilt: it is more like what my dog feels when he has an accident in the hallway and rolls over on to his back in expiation.

Still, the great advantage of my mother's view—or disadvantage, from my father's perspective—is that it recognized social obligation as being of great, indeed decisive, importance in the determination of how one should behave. The romantic view, that made a fetish of spontaneity and feeling, was an egotist's charter. Its com-

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plete victory ensured that we were entered a golden age of self-importance, of individualism without individuality.

Another memory sticks in my mind. In 1962, a very clever boy at school called M---- (these were the last days when friends called each other by their surname), who was expected to have a brilliant career in any field that he chose, came to me and enthused over a band called the Rolling Stones. I hadn't heard of it, for in those days pop music had not yet achieved its status as a cultural miasma from which it is impossible to escape. I was puzzled by his enthusiasm, which appeared feverish and disproportionate to—well, to anything. It was clear that he was in the grip of a powerful obsession, akin I suppose to a religious conversion.

M----'s academic performance declined precipitously, in a matter of weeks, so much so that a schoolmaster came to me and asked me whether I knew what was wrong with M----. Was there trouble at home that prevented him from concentrating as he should? Even then I suspected the answer, but I said nothing.

Just over four decades later, I live in a society in which everyone is physically wary of almost anyone under the age of thirty, for fear of an explosion of insensate rage or egotistical violence. We have become afraid of our own children, at least if more than three of them are congregated without adult supervision. The crudity of public expression knows no bounds; everyone demands respect but refuses to behave respectfully, and the majority of us who live without special privileges exist under an informal dictatorship of criminals. The police—who are no longer the kind of people from whom one would ask the time, but rather an alien occupying force wearing peculiar stab- and bullet-proof vestments that are festooned with repressive paraphernalia, simultaneously menacing and ineffectual—recently put a pamphlet through my door informing me that burglars were "operating" in my area and advising me how to turn my house into a kind of bank-vault. As for social pathology, we in Britain now lead the world: no country at a comparable level of economic development can begin to approach us in everything from public drunkenness to VD, from teenage pregnancy to drug abuse, from illegitimacy to burglary, from divorce to street robbery. It's Gin Lane with the National Health Service thrown in.

How has this extraordinary, and extraordinarily swift, social change come about? In a sense, of course, there can be no definitive or final, incontestable answer: history being a seamless robe, any development has roots that can be traced back to Original Sin at least. If the explanation is to be sought in the realm of ideas, why did ideas change? If it is to be sought in economic factors, why did those economic changes take place?

First Professor Davies reminds us that moral Britain was a brief and untypical interlude in the country's turbulent social history, lasting perhaps just over a century. George Orwell may have been able to write with justice in the 1930s that most foreigners were struck by the gentleness of English life, but for most of our history foreign visitors have been struck—horrified, perhaps, would be the word—by precisely the opposite qualities, the uncouthness and barbarity of our manners, whose only redeeming feature was a certain vigor. Indeed, our modern depravity is often treated by liberal commentators, anxious to avoid the blame for the changes that have occurred in Britain, as if it were nothing but a throwback to an earlier age, like a genetic condition that has skipped a generation. Our problem is, however, that we have become brutal and effete at the same time: our barbarity has no vigor to it.

The well-ordered society into which I was born was not to any large extent the product of repressive legislation, as Professor Christie points out. It is true that the sale of alcohol was controlled, but public drunkenness had declined spontaneously before any such control was instituted. Where once men took pride in never going to bed sober, and might indeed take pride in a reputation for uncontrolled bibbing, they came within a

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few generations to regard drunkenness as a sign of loss of self-control, which itself was supposedly the distinguishing feature of the civilized man when compared with the barbarian. The mistaken anthropological notion that primitive man was a child with poor impulse control actually exerted a positive social effect on everyone who wanted to distinguish himself from the primitive.

Nor did the dramatic fall in crime that occurred in the second half of the nineteenth century, and lasted until the middle of the twentieth, result from state repression—or, at any rate, from state repression alone. The phrase "poor but honest" actually meant something. Humble men who led lives of great difficulty were proud of the fact that they nevertheless conformed to canons of ethical conduct that they regarded as universally binding. A man might lose his job because of an economic downturn, but he did not lose his character. The years of the Great Depression were actually low in crime overall, despite a relative increase in property crime born of desperation. Self-respect, not self-esteem, was what people valued and aimed for: and the two aims have very different social consequences. The first imposes obligations; the second demands rights. The first is social; the second egotistic. And a society that is composed of egotistical atoms is bound to display predatory characteristics in aggregate.

The Sunday School movement was both a symptom and a cause of the drive towards respectability. I was surprised to learn from the book that three-quarters of British children were once enrolled in Sunday Schools of one denomination or another, despite the fact that Britain had long since ceased to be (if it ever really had been) a deeply religious country. Even parents whose belief was tenuous at most sent their children to Sunday School, because they believed it was morally good for them, by giving them a biblical sense of right and wrong. Underlying this was an instinctive understanding that large-scale societies needed boundaries if very disparate people, with opposing interests and political viewpoints, were to live together in tolerable peace. That some of the boundaries may have been ethically indefensible gave to reformers their *locus standi*; unfortunately, the reformist cast of mind is often an insatiable moloch that cannot leave anything alone, and wishes to destroy not this or that boundary, but *all* boundaries. For the conservative, the slippery slope is a danger to be avoided; for the reformist, it is a positive—indeed, irresistible—attraction. What lies at the bottom of the slope is much less important than the glorious sensation of sliding down it.

Professor Davies points to a very important shift in the way that social problems were conceived between the first and second half of the nineteenth century. During the moralization of Britain, people (no matter how poor or degraded) were believed to be autonomous agents, who decided for themselves how to behave. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, however, the intellectual elite began to lose faith in this model, precisely at a time when its acceptance by the population as a whole had resulted in a vast diminution of public disorder.

Perhaps the intellectual elite—growing in size as a result of the spread of education—realized that, if things continued thus, it would soon be deprived of any special or providential role in society. At any rate, it began to replace the notion of the moral autonomy of people with that of impersonal causation, or what Professor Davies calls "causalism." If people behaved badly, it was not because they decided to do so, but because they were impelled by circumstances beyond their control, such as poverty, overcrowding, or poor drainage.

It was precisely here that the role of the intellectuals proved to be so disastrous: those who, by virtue of their intellectual vocation, should have had the firmest grasp of what was going on in their own society actually had the weakest grasp. Instead of recognizing the trend to improvement for what it was, they adopted a purely static view of

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society with regard to the past and present, combined with a purely dynamic one for the future, with themselves as the motivating force behind all beneficial change. They rejected out of hand Macaulay's famous dictum that "the history of our country . . . is eminently the history of physical, of moral, and of intellectual improvement," preferring instead to concentrate on what General Booth (of the Salvation Army) called "Darkest England." Unlike Booth, however, they saw the solution to social problems as lying in state intervention decreed by themselves rather than in further or continued moralization. Their view prevailed, and just as the population had once accepted the standpoint of the great moralists and religious revivalists, so now it came to accept that of the sociologists and psychologists, namely that they, the population, were the victim of circumstances beyond their control. And they were gradually provided with material incentives, or deprived of disincentives, for accepting this view.

Professor Davies deals at length with the question of capital punishment, and the long struggle for its abolition, not because it was important in the statistical sense (even a comparatively uncommon cancer, such as that of the throat, was very much more important statistically) but because it went to the heart of the moral change that occurred in Britain. Capital punishment was a deeply symbolic question, the answer to which depended upon one's whole philosophy of life. Execution after due process was once seen as right in itself, irrespective of its actual practical effects, as the just desert of the murderer and as an expression of society's highest values; but reformers managed to change the terms of the debate, the only acceptable answer to the question being a purely utilitarian one, namely whether or not capital punishment deterred other would-be murderers. This in itself represented a general abandonment of the deontological approach to human problems for the purely instrumental one. If in practice capital punishment did not deter, it could have no justification, and since it was so difficult to prove its deterrent effect, the presumption was against it.

Oddly enough, utilitarians were not sufficiently or rigorously utilitarian: they did not even consider the possibility that the existence of the death penalty might have an effect on things other than the murder rate, and that its abandonment might symbolize such a loss of confidence in the rights of the law that the legitimacy of law itself might be called into question, with dire consequences for society as a whole. Utilitarian arguments are generally used by reformers to bolster foregone conclusions and moral propositions, not to investigate the world in all its complexity.

The death of Moral Britain has brought gains as well as losses. In some ways Britain is a more tolerant country than it was: though whether we are more tolerant of conduct different from our own, or merely so egotistically wrapped up in our own little worlds that we are indifferent to everyone else around us, is an open question. After all, the demand that we should welcome diversity requires that everyone should think the same and refrain from saying the unsayable. In the process, character has been replaced by personality, and eccentricity by whimsicality. Depth has been replaced by width.

The author studiously avoids the apocalyptic visions that are so exciting to those susceptible to them, such as I. We in Britain have, for example, learned to live with crime as a fact of life, and we know that we shall never return to the security of the old days. And the changes that have occurred in our society have been without violence, at least of the political kind. Violence has been privatized.

Yet the contrast between material advance and moral regression is itself a distressing one to contemplate. Moreover, it seems to me that our prosperity, on which such semblance of civility as survives now wholly depends (all other grounds for social solidarity having been destroyed), is in fact ex-

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tremely fragile. This prosperity is largely based upon credit, itself underwritten by property inflation. Britain is a bit like a giant pyramid scheme, and should the confidence of the creditors suddenly evaporate (which would hardly be unprecedented in the history of the world), there could be a terrible smash. Forty percent of the population is in receipt of government subvention, and regards its income as I regarded my pocket money when I was a child. If the government should ever find itself in a position of being unable to pay the subventions, except by further debasement of the currency, all hell could be let loose. In the event of a serious economic downturn, we should see unadorned the full, glorious consequences of the demoralization of Britain, consequences so great that our current disorder would seem like a golden age of civility and gentleness by comparison.

But Professor Davies is probably right: we shall just muddle through. Soon, after all, there will be no one left to remember that there is anything to regret.

Our Black Jeremiah

Cornel West
Democracy Matters:
Winning the Fight against Imperialism.
Penguin, 229 pages, $24.95

reviewed by Mark Bauerlein

Cornel West is known as a fiery professor-intellectual who brings bookish learning and argumentative rigor to political and social issues. Few academics slide so smoothly from the classroom to the rally or from the library to the talk show. While teaching at Harvard and Princeton, West worked for the 2000 campaign of Bill Bradley, traveled with Al Sharpton to Africa, appeared in *The Matrix 2* and on TV with Bill Maher. The profile seems a perfect mix of inquiry and activism. Set him on a panel on racism and he'll jump from welfare to the *Republic* to rap to Protestantism.

To sustain a public "professor" persona, though, one must not only play the media and mingle with political figures, but also compose works of intellectual heft. Ever since West became a public figure in the early 1990s, this has been a problem for him. A notorious review in *The New Republic* by Leon Wieseltier in 1995 judged West's books "almost completely worthless . . . sectarian, humorless, pedantic, self-endeared." And three years ago, President Summers of Harvard started a tempest by raising questions about West's recent efforts. Defenders retorted that Summers misunderstands the nature of public intellectual activism, but the best scholarly evidence they could marshal was *The American Evasion of Philosophy*, a middling survey of pragmatist thought that West had composed over a decade earlier.

This latest book doesn't advance the dispute. *Democracy Matters* purports to sketch the degraded state of democracy today, and to find inspiration in traditions of Socratic questioning and Jewish prophecy, as well as in youth culture. The thesis comes in fast and furious indictments. An "unholy alliance of plutocratic elites and the Christian Right" has hijacked the state for greedy and parochial ends. Free-market ideology has led the government to abandon the poor, the uninsured, the unschooled. Foreign policy is "[f]ashioned out of the cowboy mythology of the American frontier fantasy." Republican Party leaders are "drunk with power and driven by grand delusions of American domination of the world." Legal discrimination is over, but "Jim Crow Jr. is alive and well."

The charges pile up, but they never coalesce into an argument. West doesn't reason his way to conclusions, nor does he fortify his complaints with empirical evidence or illustrative cases. He simply tells us The Way Things Are. West is, Henry Louis Gates declares on the dust jacket, "Our Black Jeremiah," reciting the sins of what he believes are a fallen people and a corrupt leadership.

The solutions West proposes are just as hyperbolic as his complaints. To face the

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wrongs, he counsels, we need a mode of Socratic questioning that will "expose and extricate the antidemocratic impulses within our democracy." To act upon the ensuing insights, we must "draw on the prophetic," like the Jewish prophets who, invoking divine justice, stood up to tyrants and overcame the predations of might and wealth. Finally, to temper the Judaic law "we must draw on the tragicomic," that vision of jaded but living hope (best represented in blues and hip-hop) that keeps fatalism at bay and lightens the spirit in a world of pain.

One might rebut every paragraph in this book, but they are stubbornly resistant to discussion. West's language is overheated; his descriptions are tendentious; his moral judgments are held up as gospel from page one. West doesn't back his charges, so why bother? It is better to interpret *Democracy Matters* as a case study in academic celebrity. It shows what happens when a scholar is thrown into the media arena, hailed as an "eloquent prophet with attitude" (*Newsweek*), courted by rival universities, and invited, interviewed, and idolized without end. The process is fatal to the scholarly intelligence. If the public sphere draws an academic too far from his domain, he loses touch with that which keeps him judicious and deliberative: peer criticism. Without colleagues who thrive on punching holes in each other's work, one's conceptions are untested. Performance ends up counting for more than rigor does. In the strategic realms of media and politics, academics don't reason or inquire. They opine.

There is nothing wrong with opinion, of course, except when one writes a book of lazy pontification and pretends that it is something more. *Democracy Matters* professes to be unflinchingly critical and prophetically intellectual, but in truth the content and rhetoric remind one of a Charlie Rose hour. While talking-head criticism makes for quality television, it comes off in print as a symptomatic utterance, the words of a man freed from accountability and enamored of his own voice. Examine it closely and one sees that the characteristics of this celebrity-scholar writing are wholly opposite to the adventuresome, incisive persona displayed by the author.

West's ideas unfold with predictability and ease. The claim that Republicans engage in "myopic mendacity" comes as no surprise. That the "vicious legacy of white supremacy" need only be asserted, not explained, is a sign of West's complacency. As in a talk show appearance, the important thing for West is to articulate his message, to give it urgency.

West's language has no anchor in particulars. Bloated phrases and flamboyant epithets do the work properly done by concrete description. Sometimes, the language acquires a momentum of its own, as in West's versions of life after 9/11. Early on, 9/11 marks "the full-scale gangsterization of America." Before readers can digest *that*, a variant pops up: "9/11 plunged the whole country into the blues." The next page provides a climactic alternative: "Since 9/11 we have experienced the niggerization of America."

West's professions of liberality are belied by vilifications of his opposition. He insists upon the value of "respectful and candid dialogue," but every reference to conservatives drips with accusation. His roll call of "towering social critics" is packed with demonizers—Noam Chomsky, Susan Sontag, Angela Davis, Barbara Ehrenreich.

Finally, against progressivist principle, the personal prevails over the political. The only sustained episode in *Democracy Matters* concerns West's battle with Summers, recounted in a fifteen-page narrative aimed at shoring up his credibility. West's testimony has the air of truth, and Summers may have acted as a clod, but his response bears the pique of one unaccustomed to challenges on his home turf. Additionally, there is something sad about a distinguished professor proving his seriousness by citing his rap CD and his weekly chats on the *Tavis Smiley Show*. As for West's faith in the genius of hip-hop: What does it say of his judg-

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ment that he considers the following lines "powerful poetry and insightful social critique"?

> What you trying to pull eatin' us like cannibals
> Whatever happened to that forty acres and
> that animal
> Now you tryin' to use integration just to
> fool us
> Like Malcolm said we been hoodwinked and
> bamboozled.

It is fitting that celebrity academics should promote youth culture. West may invoke Emerson, Plato, and James Baldwin, but he saves his passion for the hip-hop performers DA Smart and Outkast. The average black student graduates from high school four years behind his white classmates. Close to 70 percent of black children are born without a father in the home. Literary reading rates for blacks fell eight points from 1992 to 2002. But the media prefers to highlight the juvenile rebelliousness and hokey cynicism of the hip-hop artist. Why should the talking head professor do any different?

Composer on the couch

Stuart Feder
Gustav Mahler: A Life in Crisis.
Yale University Press, 353 pages, $39.95

reviewed by R. J. Stove

In July 1910, the fifty-year-old Mahler—at the apex of his renown and creative gifts, despite the omnipresent threat of heart disease—discovered that his wife Alma had begun a passionate affair with the young Walter Gropius. Subsequent decades proved that for Alma's husbands, cuckoldry constituted the job description's *sine qua non* (Tom Lehrer devoted one of his most mordant lyrics to this fact), but Mahler understandably reacted with raging anguish, aggravated by bewilderment that Alma should have shucked her helot status. "You must," he had announced before their marriage, "give yourself to me *unconditionally*, shape your future life, in every detail, entirely in accordance with my needs."

He likewise squelched her youthful composing ambitions: "The role of composer falls to me—yours is that of loving companion!" (One sardonic reviewer of a 1978 Mahler biography commented: "The notion that a great artist must surely manifest 'greatness of soul' in his human relations was knocked from its Romantic pedestal long ago.")

Faced with Alma's adultery, Mahler consulted Freud. This four-hour meeting of minds—which reads like the scenario for a Tom Stoppard play—occurred during August in Leiden, Holland. About the session Mahler said uncharacteristically little. Freud, for his part, described it solely in long-delayed reminiscences, generic and reductionist even by Freudian standards:

> The necessity for the visit arose, for him, from his wife's resentment of the withdrawal of his libido from her. In highly interesting expeditions through his life history, we discovered his personal conditions for love, especially his Holy Mary complex . . .

Nine months after the Leiden visit, Mahler died. He left incomplete his Tenth Symphony, of which he had finished only the first two movements. With his conducting—especially via his decade-long dominance of the Vienna Opera—Mahler embodied a singularly lucid belief: audiences and performers must be antagonized on all possible, and many hitherto impossible, pretexts. For him, the customer was always wrong. Yet from his almost lunatic certitudes as executant, his approach to composing greatly differed, being prone to the drastic revisions that indicate fundamental lack of self-confidence. One seeks vainly in Mahler a detailed creative credo, as distinct from occasional opaque epigrams ("it [a symphony] must contain everything"). Outstanding composers need not, of course, have any such credo, but this particular gap greatly

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impedes psychobiographers, since it emphasizes their interpretations' conjectural nature.

Mahler possessed nothing of Mendelssohn's or Wagner's verbal facility, never mind Schumann's or Berlioz's. Almost every time he verged on genuine literary discernment, an attack of the Deep-and-Meaningfuls (going well beyond the sufferance which Teutonic culture traditionally extends) overcame him. Aged thirty-four, he bailed up his disciple Bruno Walter with this adolescent monologue: "Whence do we come? Whither do we go? Why am I made to feel that I am free while yet I am constrained within my personality as in a prison? What is the object of toil and sorrow? Will the meaning of life be revealed by death?" While in 1897 he converted to Catholicism—a necessary step in late-Habsburg Austria for the musical posts he coveted—he seldom alluded to his newfound religion, and gave the periodic impression of shame over having adopted it.

At least Mahler eschewed a convulsive loathing for that religion, in which he differed from Freud. He spared Catholics, as Catholics, the venom which his fellow Jews as Jews often elicited from him. ("No effort of imagination", he reported in 1903, during a Ukrainian visit, "could conjure up a dirtier creature than the Polish Jew of these parts.") Not for Mahler the jovial Christophobic menace with which Freud, *en route* to America, proclaimed his own proselytizing intentions: "We're bringing them the plague." Moreover, Mahler harbored even less interest in psychoanalysis than Freud did in music. Despite the two men's obvious lack of lasting rapport, Stuart Feder has sought to yoke them in a quasi-Plutarchian double harness, devoting almost as much space to the analyst's intellectual background as to the composer's.

Neither man benefits from this enforced propinquity. Examining Feder's bland summaries of Freud's career soon becomes an eerie experience, in that Freud receives the benefit of every possible doubt: as if Frederick Crews, H. J. Eysenck, Fuller Torrey, and other such recent demystifiers of the great panjandrum had never existed. (Worse yet, as if this were still 1948 and Laurence Olivier were still conscripting Ernest Jones to interpret *Hamlet* for him.) In one memorably evidence-free passage, Feder refers to the violinist Arnold Rosé, who married Mahler's sister Justine, as an "oedipal substitute for her brother." If only Feder had acknowledged the full significance of his own quote from an unusually prudent Freud in 1928: "Before the problem of the creative artist, analysis must, alas, lay down its arms."

Perhaps the Freudian quotient is intended as product differentiation in a grossly overcrowded field. Tomes on Mahler continue to flood the market, ranging from musically illiterate coffee-table feuilletons—along the lines of *The Mahler I Knew or at Least Met Twice in the Elevator*—to Henry-Louis de La Grange's hagiography, the third volume of which takes 1,051 pages to describe just three years of Mahler's life. Unlike La Grange, Feder regularly hints at Mahler's failure to attain human perfection; he rightly exhibits, for example, healthy skepticism about Mahler's lament, "I lead an existence directed entirely towards others." Regrettably, Feder's observations on Mahler's actual output are both limited and superficial, far inferior to the average CD booklet's insights. Strange copy-editing errors further undermine the reader's confidence. Georges Clemenceau somehow turns into Paul Clemenceau, and Oscar Kokoschka's vital statistics become hopelessly garbled (Kokoschka lived from 1886 to 1980, but Feder credits him with reaching the age of ninety-six and, four pages earlier, with living from 1866 to 1944).

Feder's best pages deal with Mahler's New York Philharmonic sojourn (1908–1911), which hinted at what Mahler could have achieved abroad if he had ever supplemented his podium brilliance with a particle of courtesy. (He called the Philharmonic "a real American orchestra. Untalented and phlegmatic.") At this period Toscanini man-

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aged his own transition from the Old World to the New with spectacular success, but then, Toscanini perceived by instinct, as Mahler with all his book-learning never realized, the difference between clear-sighted artistic dictatorship and indiscriminate, hectoring messianism.

Overall, nevertheless, it is hard to recommend Feder's account. There are a dozen other eminent composers of Mahler's time who, unlike Mahler, have yet to be honored by an adequate modern biography. Let us hope that a few publishers will soon steer would-be chroniclers to those figures, rather than imagining that a Triffid-like profusion of full-length Mahler analyses is forever desirable.

Summer reading

Michael Dirda
Bound to Please:
An Extraordinary One-Volume
Literary Education.
W. W. Norton, 556 pages, $29.95

reviewed by Stefan Beck

The *sortes Virgilianae* is an old form of do-it-yourself divination: you open the *Aeneid* at random, put a finger on a verse, and therein find wisdom or solace tailored to your troubles. For the bored or "blocked" man of letters, Michael Dirda's collection *Bound to Please* has a similarly tonic effect. It includes a hundred-odd of Dirda's reviews—of books, yes, but also of the minds behind the books. Pick one at random. Depending on whether you know the work discussed, you'll receive a thoughtful reconsideration or, perhaps more fun, an enthusiastic introduction.

Michael Dirda has reviewed books for *The Washington Post Book World* since 1978. *Bound to Please* represents, by Dirda's account, 20 percent of his output. This is an impressive amount of writing; it is the result of a downright *alarming* amount of reading. (When did he eat, sleep, or bathe?) He was spurred not by penury and deadlines but by his love of words. His first review, two hundred words on John Gardner's *In the Suicide Mountains*, took him a full day to write. "No prose since that on Trajan's column," he writes, "has been so carefully chiseled."

Every reviewer loves to read and write, or says he does, but Dirda's joyful monomania goes beyond that, and it is a rare and wonderful thing. It's infectious. If literary reading is on the decline, as the NEA's recent "Reading at Risk" survey solemnly announced it is, *Bound to Please* ought to be required summer reading for high school students. One cannot browse in it without wanting to rush to a used bookstore and shell out for a stack. (I, for one, will be reading my wages at the Strand come next month. Thank you, Mr. Dirda.)

Dirda is a great guide, a Virgil leading both novice and experienced readers on a tour of his own Reader's Paradise. His collection, promising to be a "literary education," moves effortlessly from age to age, style to style, genius to genius. Sections like "Romantic Dreamers," "Visionaries and Moralists," "Lovers, Poets, and Madmen," and "Writers of Our Time" organize this delightful embarrassment of riches.

In "Old Masters," the first section, we find Herodotus, Ovid, and the Bible. There are surprises, too: an appreciation of the Bible is followed by an essay on William Tyndale, "the first translator, into English, of the New Testament from the Greek and of about half the Old Testament from the Hebrew." We miss Shakespeare, but shake hands with Christopher Marlowe, brawler, spy, and playwright-poet—by way of Anthony Burgess's *Dead Man in Deptford*. In a review of Robert Irwin's *Arabian Nights: A Companion*, we are tantalized with the following:

> Most of us, I suspect, know *The Arabian Nights* only from the simplified, bowdlerized versions found in the nursery. So to read the unexpurgated tales can be a revelation. First of all, they are quite exceptionally gripping. Two illicit lovers try desperately to convince a mur-

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> derous demon that they are strangers to each other. The monster turns to the man and says, "'Take this sword and strike her head off, and I will believe that you do not know her and let you go free.' I replied, 'I will do it,' and I took the sword and sprang toward her."

In bits like this one, Dirda seizes upon one of the great rewards of reading: the odd scene or detail that lodges itself unshakably in the reader's imagination. *Bound to Please* is filled with such details; it whets one's appetite for them. Thus is Pepys's frenzied lechery evoked in one delightful, albeit barely intelligible, quotation: "mi mano was sobra her pectus, and so did hazer with grand delight." (Next thing you know, you're groping your shelves for a copy of his *Diaries*.) The ending of Borges's story "The Two Kings and the Two Labyrinths," in which a vengeful Arab king leaves his Babylonian enemy to die in the vast "labyrinth" of the desert, conjures up in a single paragraph the writer's marvelous, byzantine imagination. Dirda is an expert at picking out these little reminders of why we love the writers we love to read.

None of this is to say that Dirda focuses narrowly on literature as entertainment. His reviews are informed not only by his enjoyment, but also by stores of historical and critical knowledge. It is no small thing that almost every review of a foreign-language work includes a discussion of those translations considered best, and those to be avoided. (Dirda's review of Donald Frame's translation of the *Complete Works of François Rabelais*, for instance, dilates on the relative merits of *four* other translations. Can he really have read all of them?)

A four-page piece on Proust draws on a staggering wealth of materials: a biography by Jean-Yves Tadié, a volume of Proust's letters, a "field guide" by Roger Shattuck, and an abridgment of *A Remembrance of Things Past*. Dirda, even in a brief essay, manages some sweeping gestures of appreciation:

> To those who respond to his sinuous prose—and many people don't—there is no more powerful hypnotic drug in all literature. *In Search of Lost Time* is no mere novel; it is a world, a universe that alternately expands into every layer of society and then contracts back into the Narrator's consciousness. Its author once compared his masterpiece to *The Arabian Nights*. But the book might also be likened to a modern *Metamorphoses*, for it depicts both public and personal life as restless, uncertain, and disheartening, a domain of constant transformation, of unceasing flux and shocking revelation.

This is proof of Dirda's discipline, dedication, and craftsmanship. Few reviewers would take in so much to produce such short pieces. For Dirda, it's business as usual: he reads to discover, to add to the critical tools at his command. And anyone who raises a skeptical eyebrow at that *abridgment* of Proust should be advised: "During that gray and rainy fall of [Dirda's] junior year in college, [he] read Proust steadily for five, six, eight hours a day." It seems Dirda has heeded Balzac's dictum—noted in the introduction to the section titled "Professionals at Work"—that "[c]onstant work is the law of art as it is of life."

Dirda's reviews please, as promised, but do they rise to the level of a permanent artistic contribution? *Bound to Please* is intelligent, comprehensive, and so indispensable to anyone who craves a real literary education. There's just one thing: it doesn't contain a single negative review. Not even any faint praise, really. On the first page of his introduction, Dirda explains, "By only the loosest definition . . . can the contents of *Bound to Please* be regarded as criticism. Instead, think of these articles as old-fashioned appreciations, a fan's notes, good talk."

So we *have* been warned. But simply pointing out a flaw doesn't correct it, and the total absence of vitriol from these pages *is* a flaw. After five-hundred-plus pages of loving praise, one yearns for nothing so much as Dale Peck's savage, occasionally foul-mouthed hatchet jobs, or James Wood's

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precise dismantlings. One wants to see clay feet in pieces. After all, to be educated is to be able to sniff out garbage as well as genius. Alas, *Bound to Please* cannot help one cultivate that discriminating nose.

Hand in hand with this deficiency is Dirda's sometimes somewhat hokey literary populism. He writes, "*Bound to Please* will, I hope, encourage its readers to look beyond the boundaries of the fashionable, established, or academic. No cultivated person today should be hamstrung by unthinking prejudices about fantasy, crime fiction, or the literature of other times and places." (It is difficult to see where "the literature of other times and places" fits into that caveat, but we will let that be.) Preoccupation with low culture *is* fashionable and academic. Vladimir Nabokov once wrote of his distaste for professors who feign love for detective fiction. (He himself derided the genre as formulaic.) The point is not really whether there is good detective fiction, or fantasy, or sci-fi—certainly there is, on all counts—but that noisily proclaiming so is just a means of looking like a broad-minded literary omnivore, or, worse yet, a "man of the people."

Can a man of Dirda's intellect really desire any of this? Does he truly want to write for "the semimythical common reader . . . one who is sleepily flipping through the newspaper while sipping coffee on a Sunday morning"? Anyone who has devoted as much of his life to reading and study as Dirda has might reasonably prefer a reader with *some* of the mental equipment to appreciate that learning. Yet he is content to dwell in his Joe Paperback persona.

That persona grates at times. Many of these reviews, no matter how deep their critical insight or thorough their research, end with embarrassing lines like: "You laugh, you get dizzy, you lose your bearings or even your lunch. But what a ride!" or "You gotta love a book like that!" or (of a study of the eighteenth-century "Lunar Men") "Start reading some night when the moon is full" or "What a love story! What a book!" Conclusions like these are lazy; they seem meant to distract that "common reader" from the uncommon brilliance of what he has just read—so that he scratches his head and says, "Gee, I guess he's just a reg'lar sorta feller, like me." There is something frightfully self-conscious, and yet unself-confident, about this strategy.

The problem is: one tends to be suspicious of a critic to whom this chipper positivity comes so easily. There are bad or overrated writers in what we think of as the "canon." Even the writers we love best stumble at times. Coming to grips with this is a necessary step in one's development as a reader, but *Bound to Please* doesn't adequately hint at it. It seems to say: Read, *enjoy* yourself, and you will have become a Reader. But Dirda doesn't *believe* that, does he?

All told, however, none of these shortcomings ever quite overshadows the collection's fine points. It is a thorough and beautifully written document of the great pleasure reading can bring. So it makes one want to read, and to read a great variety of things—literature, history, poetry, commentary, and on and on. This encouragement by example should be welcomed by both new and veteran page-turners.

Shorter notices

Peter H. Wood
Weathering the Storm:
Inside Winslow Homer's *Gulf Stream*.
The University of Georgia Press,
128 pages, $24.95

In my book *The Rape of the Masters*, I devote one chapter to the critical sabotage practiced upon Winslow Homer's famous maritime painting *The Gulf Stream* (1900). Homer's painting depicts a dismasted sloop bobbing helplessly in storm-tossed waters. Reclining on the rear deck is a shirtless, grim-faced Negro who scans the waters aft as a school of angry-looking sharks circles the boat. Asked by some anxious ladies for an explanation of the painting, Homer wrote to his dealer:

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> I regret very much that I have painted a picture that requires any description—The subject of this picture is comprised in *its title*. . . . The boat & sharks are outside matters of little consequence. *They have been blown out to sea* by a *hurricane*. You can tell these ladies that the unfortunate negro who is now so dazed & parboiled, will be rescued & returned to his friends and home, & ever after live happily.

Well, the contemporary equivalent of those twittering ladies are the academic art historians who, unsatisfied with the *art* Homer has given them, insist on populating the painting with various political themes.

The chief villain of my reflections on Homer in *The Rape of the Masters* is Albert Boime, a professor of art history at the University of California at Los Angeles. According to Professor Boime, Homer's painting is "an allegory of the black man's victimization at the end of the nineteenth century." It has more to do with "the history of slavery in the West Indies" and "America's imperialist ambitions" than with Homer's effort to capture a scene from the Caribbean. I thought Professor Boime's interpretation was pretty extreme—indeed, I thought it was ridiculous. I still do.

But now it's time for Professor Boime to move over. This year's prize for the most egregious importation of racial politics into Winslow Homer's work must go to Peter H. Wood, professor of history at Duke University. I mentioned an article on Homer by Professor Wood in *The Rape of the Masters*, but now he has come out with a whole book on the subject. Does Homer depict a storm in his painting? According to Professor Wood, "at the heart of this storm was black disenfranchisement." Is there some rope on the deck of the boat Homer painted? Think noose, think lynching, think "potent emblem of threat and intimidation." Is there a breaking wave in the near distance? "Like the rope," the wave has "connotations of racial violence." What about the "looming whitecap"? The "dry-land meaning" of the word, according to Professor Wood, "is associated . . . with issues of race relations." The sharks? They "symbolize" "the transatlantic slave trade." The sugarcane spilling out of the boat's hold? Yes, you got it: "sugarcane symbolizes the long and tangled history of New World slavery." And so on.

Homer thought he had painted a gripping maritime disaster from the Gulf Stream, a dangerous patch of water he had crossed at least ten times. That's not enough for Professors Boime and Wood, though. For them, this great but famously reclusive, notoriously apolitical artist has to be updated and made to serve in the politically correct ideological campaigns of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Homer's painting, according to Professor Wood, "deals in subtle and extended ways with slavery, U.S. imperialism in the Caribbean, southern race wars, and Jim Crow segregation." Homer may have thought that the subject of his painting was "comprised in its title." Academics like Professor Wood are eager to show him how wrong he was. What a travesty.

—Roger Kimball

Natan Sharansky & Ron Dermer
The Case for Democracy:
The Power of Freedom to Overcome Tyranny and Terror.
Public Affairs, 279 pages, $26.95

Critics harp on the "hubris" of the Bush administration's plan to democratize the Middle East. *It simply can't be done!* they wail. *You'll destabilize the region! Breed more terrorists! Trigger doomsday!* Sometimes, not content with this exaggerated pessimism, they opt for condescension: *The Arabs aren't* ready *for freedom*. Worse still: *They don't want it*. These arguments, usually propped up by cursory observations about *sharia* or other aspects of Muslim culture, are in use by everyone from the top Mideast analysts down to the anti-war student activists on the quad.

Yet, says Natan Sharansky in *The Case for Democracy*, these arguments aren't new. They are precisely the ones many U.S. intellectuals

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and public figures made about the Russians—up until they were spectacularly shot down by the Soviet Union's collapse. Sharansky, who spent nine years as a KGB prisoner for dissident activities in the USSR, is appalled to see freedom's power again being underestimated. His book clarifies parallels between the West's *détente* with Soviet communism and its more recent toleration of totalitarianism in Tehran, Riyadh, and—deflating the "Islam" excuse—Pyongyang.

A friend saw me reading this book and joked, "He needed three-hundred pages to make the case?" Indeed, many points Sharansky makes seem elementary. He devotes considerable space to the fact that oppressed people, afraid to speak out, are not reliable sources of information about their own circumstances. Doesn't that go without saying? (Well, he says, not for most *journalists*—or Jimmy Carter.) The strength of this case is not merely what it says, but who says it. Sharansky speaks not from a starry-eyed idealism but from his own grim experience of what he calls a "fear society." How can a talking head argue with that?

—*Stefan Beck*

Robert McCrum
Wodehouse: A Life.
Norton, 530 pages, $27.95

Do we need another biography of P. G. Wodehouse? Probably not. Richard Usborne, David Jasen, and Frances Donaldson have already done the heavy lifting, and Norman Murphy, Barry Phelps, and Lee Davis put in their own nine-to-fives. But as King Lear says to Goneril and Regan, "O, reason not the need." Robert McCrum has written an eminently enjoyable, readable biography of that singular creator of Jeeves and Wooster, Lord Emsworth, Aunt Agatha, and Psmith. The author of nearly one hundred books (which added 1,600 quotations to the *Oxford English Dictionary*), Wodehouse exported a mad Englishness to the world at a time when England was going insane at home. Like Jane Austen, "who famously worked on a 'little bit (two inches wide) of ivory,'" Wodehouse created a universe in miniature and "placed his characters in a recently vanished society."

McCrum's *Wodehouse* occasionally falls prey to the biographer's follies of Freudian couch-trip and pedantic laundry list. Yet I must say that this biography had the rare effect of encouraging me to read and re-read the literature of its subject. McCrum's task, as he puts it, has been to take Wodehouse back from the "medley of ill-informed stories recycling aspects of his wartime disgrace; and secondly, some equally uncritical celebrations of his silly ass heroes and the charmed, lost world of upper-class Edwardian England." Amen. Usborne's *Plum Sauce* can, for example, leave you with that slight taste of English phlegm in your gullet, as the English are at their least funny when they point out their own humor.

Fortunately, McCrum approaches his subject with high seriousness. In particular, he treats Wodehouse's wartime experiences to an intense scrutiny that further exonerates the writer from moral culpability in broadcasting innocuous, stiff-upper-lip statements—destined for America but rerouted to England—over the CBS radio network from wartime Berlin, where he was interned. In the rules of war, contributing to an enemy's broadcast system is a treasonable offense, no matter what the message. His ill-treatment by perfidious Albion over this incident, as Malcolm Muggeridge put it, was "one of those nauseating outbursts of public wrath, when the ecclesiastical, literary and administrative performing seals find an occasion to outdo the monkey house in the grimaces they put on and the yells they admit." Wodehouse was as ill-suited for encountering modern England as he was for dealing with Nazi Germany. Instead, he escaped into a world that "transformed comic prose into a kind of poetry, with a profound instinct for the music of English." This biography makes a good case for why.

—*James Panero*

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Notebook

The saddhu of sodomy

by Theodore Dalrymple

There are some people whose desire to write, or at least to see themselves in print, exceeds by far the urgency of anything they might have to say. They are, in essence, attention-seekers, rather than seekers after the truth. For this fraternity or sorority—I hesitate to use the modern cant word "community"—the existence of conventions or taboos is essential, for it is by breaking them that they may obtain the notice that they desire; indeed it is the only method available to them. Oddly enough, however, the last taboo that they or their publishers claim to have broken turns out not to be the last taboo after all. Last taboos are thus rather like the last appearances (positively the last) of aging prima donnas; and future attention-seekers need not fear that mankind will ever run out of taboos for them to break.

The author of *The Surrender: An Erotic Memoir* is a standard modern taboo-breaker, since her book is largely about a subject not much written about, namely the joys of sodomy.[1] She claims to have discovered the meaning of life, or to have achieved a kind of enlightenment, through this activity (if she hadn't, the book would have been pornography merely); a man's penis in her rectum is to her what the sacred bo tree was to the Buddha.

Of course, Miss Bentley is the world authority on her sex life, though it does not follow that what she writes is entirely true. Plenty of world authorities on plenty of subjects have written, or even testified in court, dishonestly on their subject of expertise. Nor does the possession of world authority mean that the subject is intrinsically interesting, at least to others. Miss Bentley laments that her sodomizer did not reach his three-hundredth entry into her rectum, only his two-hundred-ninety-eighth: by this stage in the book, however, the reader is unlikely to agree, for there is little doubt that orgasms are better experienced than read about. The waves of transcendent pleasure that rolled through Miss Bentley's corporeal being, and shook her to her very soul, do not transfer well to the written page. This is not her fault: language isn't cut out for this kind of thing. The blame is in the exhibitionist effort, not the execution. And when she writes of "the joy that lies on the other side of convention, where risk is real and rapture resides," one feels that she is like a little girl riding her bicycle with her hands outspread, saying, "Look at me, mummy," in the knowledge that her mother will be appalled and terrified, and will probably scream.

Perhaps the most intriguing pages of her short book are the acknowledgments. No fewer than fifty-three people are thanked in them. This is indeed strange, and no doubt will guiltily raise many half-formed and hastily suppressed questions in the reader's mind. Although hers is a work of world

1 *The Surrender: An Erotic Memoir*, by Toni Bentley; Regan Books, 224 pages, $24.95.

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authority, it is not, after all, in any sense scholarly: she did not have to consult anyone on an arcane point of cuneiform script, say, or the biochemistry of Australian snake venoms. All she had to do was remember and fashion her memories on the page. What exactly, then, were Mary Bresovitch's and Ray Sawhill's contributions (to take two names completely at random) that they should be thus immortalized? Is this an intimate memoir or a collective essay? For exhibitionists, I suppose it is the same thing, and poetry is emotion recollected in front of an audience.

The next literary erotic memoir will have to tackle a sexual activity considerably less tame than mere sodomy. (A taboo? Miss Bentley quotes the latest, deeply uninteresting survey of sexual behavior in America, proving that millions of Americans practice it, especially as they get older, and especially if they are well-educated.) It is in the nature of sensationalist literature that the next sensation must be greater than the last, or it produces no sensation at all. How about necrophilia, then? Our author will coyly admit that sex with the living has not really ever satisfied him (or her). He or she has tried and tried and tried again—of course, the efforts will have to be described in extenso, for the sake of verisimilitude, for in this kind of memoir nothing can be taken as read—but somehow the living sexual partners leave him or her with a feeling of incompleteness.

One day, our hero or heroine meets an old friend to whom he or she confides his or her sexual dissatisfaction. The friend knows just what he or she means: sex with live people is apt to lead to all kinds of complications, such as jealousy, recrimination, demands for more, commitment, and so forth. There is also the increasingly important problem of the power relations between the couple, for power these days is seen as the summum bonum of human relations. It is tiresome to have to achieve power over another and then defend it. Surely there must be a sexual activity in which such complications do not arise?

The friend then asks whether he or she has ever considered sex with the dead? This is the only form of sex in which it is impossible to inflict pain on others: it is therefore ethically not merely permissible but (since the avoidance of the infliction of pain on others is the beginning and perhaps the end of morality) compulsory, at least if there has to be sex at all. And, as it happens, the friend has the key to a local pathology department. The scene is thus set for an orgy in the morgue.

Unlike the erotic memoir of the future, I shall pass over the mechanical details, because—of course—readers of the memoir will be interested only in the philosophy of necrophilia, not in the act itself, which will be described in the book only for the sake of establishing authenticity and the author's world authority on his or her own life. Our necrophiliac memoirist will dilate on what he or she has learnt from his or her experience, for example that our revulsion at corpses is but a social prejudice and can be overcome with a little exposure to their positive advantages as sexual partners. Moreover, the fact that corpses can be sexually arousing and desirable will act as a consolation to the dying; they will not be forgotten as soon as the breath is out of them after all. Since these are philosophical points that readers will almost certainly not previously have considered, the erotic memoir will be able to lay claim to a purpose deeper than might at first sight appear, and that some critics at least will take seriously.

Goodness knows what will be the sexual experience extolled in the next erotic memoir after the necrophiliac one, but I have great faith in Man's inventive capacities, especially where the hope of quick sales is concerned.

Of course, Miss Bentley is hardly the first person to seek spiritual transcendence through physical experience. Man is a physical being and his awareness of the transcendent (if a transcendent realm exists) can arrive only through his physical being. Pain

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and discomfort are sometimes used to achieve this transcendence: not long ago, for example, at the vast Hindu festival on the Ganges known as the Kumbh Mela, when the waters of the river are believed to turn briefly into nectar that washes away sins, I met a saddhu who had held one arm aloft for more than a quarter of a century. Now, of course, it was firmly fibrosed in its vertical position, and his gnarled fingers had grown into the palm of his hand. An angry rationalist approached him and demanded to know, in no very friendly or respectful terms, why he had turned himself into a cripple in this fashion, when the last thing India needed was another useless mouth to feed.

With great good humor and patience, the saddhu said that he had used his pain, which of course had bothered him greatly at the beginning, to transcend the physical realm and reach a higher sphere of being, free of the accidental and filled only with the essential. As to being a useless mouth to feed: having become the object of worshipful charity allowed people to express their goodness and their belief in the transcendent realm that he had, or was trying, to reach. In this case, however, a soft answer most definitely did not turn away wrath.

Miss Bentley presents herself to us as the saddhu of sodomy. "Bliss, I learned from being sodomized, is an experience of eternity in a moment of real time." And "The direct path to God has become clear, has been cleared." But somehow one doesn't quite believe in her spiritual quest, because she's given the game away in the first two sentences of her book.

She writes: "I once loved a man so much that I no longer existed—all Him, no Me." She continues: "Now I love myself just enough that no man exists—all Me, no Them." In other words, she is incapable of a relationship with another human being. Either she is an object herself, or the man becomes an object; and her motto in dealing with others is "Annihilate that ye be not annihilated."

Any form of mutuality is impossible for her, any warmth of feeling, any sympathy for another. She continues in this chilling opening passage (no pun intended): "They [the men] used to be God, and I used to be a figment of my own imagination; now men are figments of my imagination. Same game, different positions. I don't know how to play any other way. Someone must be on top, someone on bottom." In other words, relations between men and women, as conceived by her, are nothing but a zero-sum power game.

Clearly Miss Bentley is a person whom one would not cross the road to meet; rather, she is a person whom one would cross the road not to meet. It is, of course, possible that she is not really as she presents herself, that she is actually very different, what used to be known as a warm and wonderful human being, but then the question would be why she wished to exhibit herself before the public (as large a public as possible) in this icy, self-centered, sociopathic light? The desire to make money is the best, or least damaging, conceivable answer to this particular question, a motive with which most of us can identify.

Is this belief that one either uses other people, or is oneself used by them, and that no other possible relationships exist between people sexually and no doubt in other ways also, more common than it was in former times? (By former times, I mean a few decades ago at most.) I suspect that it is, though I cannot actually prove it beyond reasonable doubt, with knock-down evidence.

Several intellectual tendencies, feminism not least among them, have suggested that power is the supreme, even the only, good, and that inequality of power is the supreme, even the only, evil. Kindness, tenderness, generosity, and a host of other qualities hardly count. Indeed, they are seen as masks for inequality. After all, you can be kind only if it is within your power to be unkind; and that implies an inequality of power between the bestower and the receiver of kindness.

From a realistic point of view, however, power is ineradicable as a feature of human

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relations. Equality, as Miss Bentley informs us, is not only boring but impossible; so is sharing of power, or any check to power. As Humpty Dumpty, an avatar of her miserable philosophy, put it, "The question is which is to be master—that's all." It seems to be the only question that interests her.

For Miss Bentley (at least, as she would like to present herself to us, her public), life is masturbation, and the world, including its population, is an extended dildo for her use and delectation. She flies from emotional involvement with other people as from a plague. I have little doubt that this represents quite accurately a certain spirit of the age, a kind of individualism without individuality, at least for a larger proportion of the population than ever before. But it is a deeply unsatisfying spirit, one incapable of leading to happiness or fulfilment. In the midst of plenty we are in dearth.

The desire for a large audience—that is to say, exhibitionism—is a substitute for intimacy, but a very poor one. The blurb states that this is an intimate memoir, but it is as intimate as Yankee Stadium. Just as one would suspect that anyone who claimed to have five thousand close friends did not know what friendship was, so anyone who writes in this fashion of her experience is incapable of intimacy. That is why explicitness is almost always, in the end, pornography, and why there should always be things that cannot be said in polite company. This is not prudery: it is prudence, for only thus can the most valuable of human experiences be preserved.

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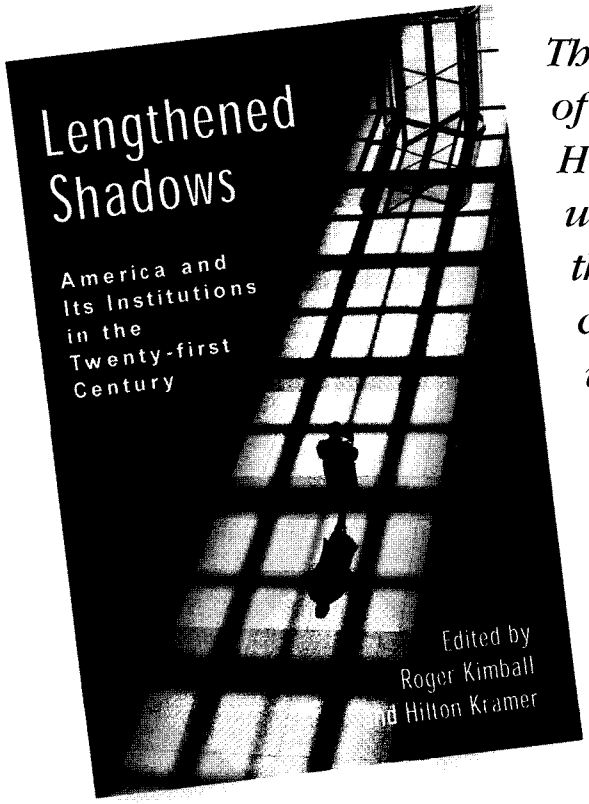

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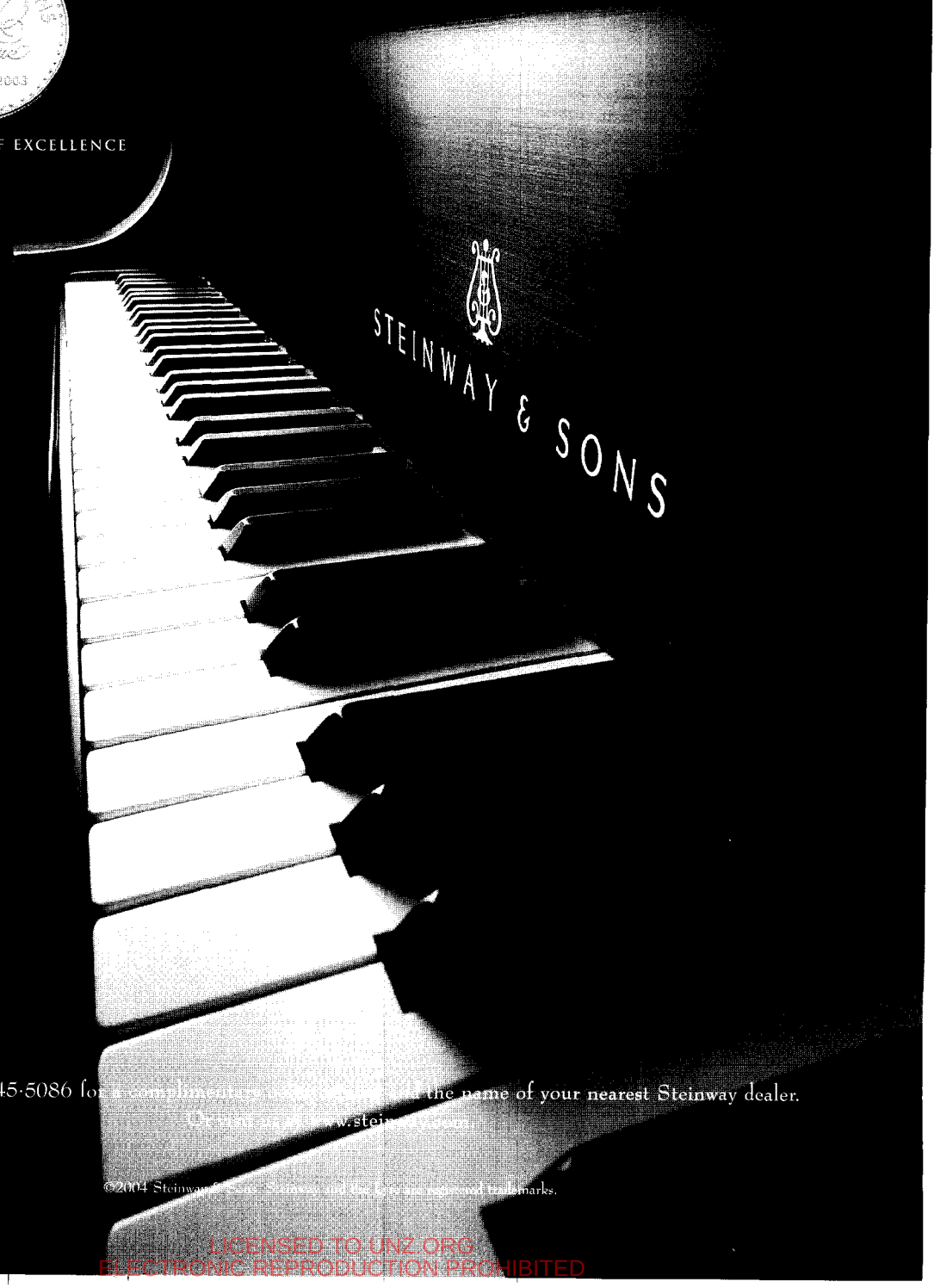

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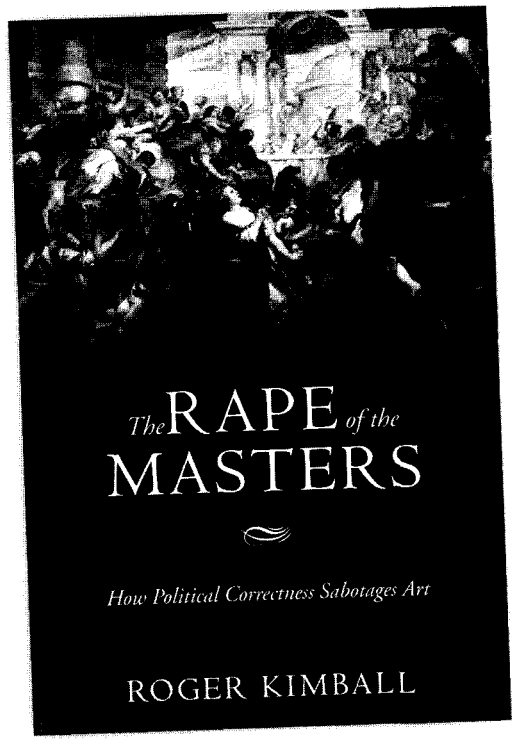

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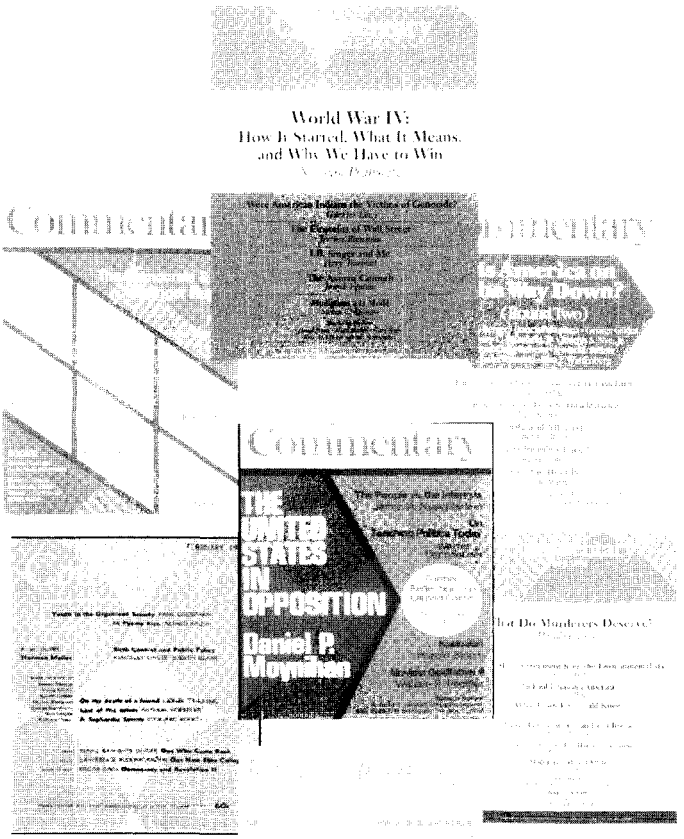

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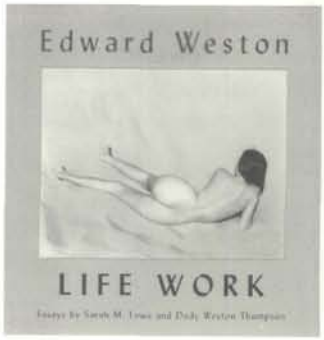

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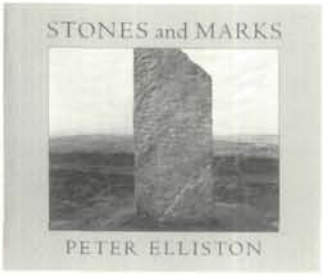

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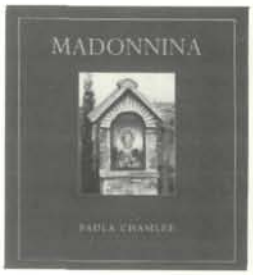

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